

cineACTION

ISSUE 85 2011

Slow Film
Mumblecore
Crowd Pleasers
Personality
Documentary
Berlinale 2011

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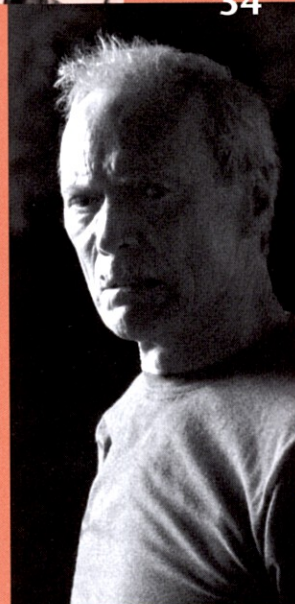


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SLOW FILM AND CROWD PLEASERS

The two themes selected for this issue of CineAction work off each other as two halves of the same coin. The first refers to a type of 'art film' that while seemingly minimalist, in fact requires intense audience concentration and effort to produce meaning; the second denotes films that have given audiences what they expect in entertainment but may have more to offer when closely observed and analyzed.

The idea for the theme of Slow Film came to me as I was trying to come to grips with my initial response to Kelly Reichardt's recent film *Meek's Cutoff* (cf. *Cineaction* 82/3). Yes. I too had drifted off at various times of the screening, and my reaction at the end of it was a definitive 'huh?' However, the film stayed with me and months later became the focus of an investigation into just why and just how slow films work their way into our consciousness. For this theme, I selected four papers that touch on various aspects of slow film, from analyses of films by directors Tsai Ming-liang and Bela Tarr, widely recognized as being in the forefront of those working in this mode, to a director not usually associated with it, Sofia Coppola, and lastly an American Independent 'movement' recently identified and called 'mumblecore'.

The second theme, 'Crowd Pleasers', came about as an attempt to balance out Slow Film with its opposite: films that are the more popular products of Hollywood. While Slow Films are notoriously not made for mass distribution or consumption, Hollywood's first concern is with how much money can be made on each film it puts out. Nevertheless, each of the four papers in this section uncover fresh reasons for reconsidering the topics of director as auteur (Clint Eastwood and *Gran Torino*); the genre Romcom featuring 'women of a certain age' (*Last Chance Harvey* and *It's Complicated*); the documentary as a promotional vehicle for its director (e.g. Michael Moore, Morgan Spurlock); and a Superhero film (*X-Men*) looked at here for its depictions of race and gender.

Also included in this issue are two other papers: one, a review of the Berlinale 2011 and the other, a brief history of Taiwanese film which in itself encapsulates the struggle within an industry between commercially successful films and art films.

—Susan Morrison

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

ISSUE 86:

FUTURES OF CINEMA

Not long ago critics and scholars were lamenting the 'end of cinema.' Apparently the obituaries were premature but the future of cinema is still uncertain. Contributions on the state of cinema and its possible futures; the ongoing impact of digital technologies; the aesthetics of cinema in a multi-mediascape; the future of national cinemas amidst relentless corporate globalization; the future of political filmmaking in this cinematic future.

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Deadline for submissions: September 1, 2011

ISSUE 87:

CRITICISM AND CLOSE READINGS

Edited by Florence Jacobowitz fjacob@yorku.ca and Richard Lippe rlippe@yorku.ca

Please email any questions or interest to the editors. Submissions in hard copy mailed to the editors at 40 Alexander Street, #705, Toronto Ontario, Canada M4Y 1B5.

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A Cinema of Recession

MICRO-BUDGETING, MICRO-DRAMA, AND THE "MUMBLECORE" MOVEMENT

BY MARIA SAN FILIPPO

Mumblecore appears to be the first significant movement of 21st century U.S. film, our delegate to the contemporary orientation in global art cinema towards what the *New York Times*' A.O. Scott has deemed "neo-neo realism."¹ Even more significantly, mumblecore models a viable alternative to struggling forms of "specialty" (art and independent) cinema production and distribution in American media markets. In the last decade, the theatrical market has grown increasingly dependent on high-concept, low-risk projects geared at teens and families. This industrial climate has proven both boon and hindrance to specialty cinema, for which new modes of distribution, promotion, and consumption sustain demand even as theatrical exhibition encounters constraint. Producers, sellers, critics, and audiences of specialty cinema within U.S. markets have adapted substantially over the past decade, developing strategies for survival in the wake of challenges from competitive media, changing consumption behaviors, and the economic crisis. Another *New York Times* film critic who has spilled a good deal of ink waxing ecstatic about mumblecore, Dennis Lim claims that the movement "signals a paradigm shift in how movies are made and how they find an audience."² With an eye to offering both an observational document and a discursive analysis of mumblecore's aesthetic congruity, promotion and distribution tactics, and reception histories through careful consideration of its origins, ontology, and evolution, I aim more broadly to illuminate how contemporary specialty cinema is adopting impressive strategies of survival.

Mumblecore's micro-budgeted minimalist aesthetic, localized D.I.Y. generative methods, and distinctively unpolished idiom actively resist both Hollywood's model of packaging, outsourcing, and merchandising, as well as recent American independent cinema's reliance on heartwarming quirkiness featuring star power working for scale. Exploiting digital technology and electronic culture while eschewing frontloading and other high-risk financing, mumblecore signals its pared-down production mode and heightened naturalism through its branding as an economical and authentic restorative fit for an era of recession and proactive citizenship. Facing a domestic market for specialty film dominated by feel-good "indies", audience-friendly imports, and commercial auteurs' clout, mumblecore has managed to gain cinephile acclaim and hipster credibility largely by accessing alternative forms of distribution. Yet the

response to mumblecore by film scholars and critics ranges radically, from Robert Sickels' venerating "I would argue that they are at the forefront of a revolutionary technological movement that will undoubtedly have profound long term effects on the industry" to Amy Taubin's dismissive "never more than a flurry of festival hype and blogosphere branding."³ As someone whose allegiances are firmly in the first camp, I freely concede this piece's intention in part as an appreciation of mumblecore. The critical contribution I wish to add to those already expressed by other enthusiasts concerns the three realms in which I consider mumblecore to have played a uniquely important role: in proving the viability of digital distribution, in rejuvenating U.S. art cinema's commercial appeal without sacrificing artistic or ethical integrity, and in offering an exceptionally honest and thoughtful consideration of contemporary American sexual mores.

Like film noir or Italian neo-realism, also terms popularized by critics, mumblecore's naming signals a reflective moment of self-recognition by its creators and consumers. The origins of the term are now lore: sound mixer Eric Masunaga jokingly devised the moniker to describe films he had worked on that were screening at 2005's South by Southwest (SxSW) Festival; it went viral when filmmaker Andrew Bujalski dropped it in an *Indiewire.com* interview soon after. While Bujalski and the other youthful directors lumped together renounce both the grouping and the term, calling it "reductive", "obnoxious", and "alienating"⁴, the commercial advantage of having a searchable brand in today's Google-verse is indisputable. It is also useful for distinguishing a group of filmmakers from those to which they are invariably compared. As Lim notes, alongside "Richard Linklater's earnest philosophers or Noah Baumbach's poised wiseacres, Mr. Bujalski's sheepish drifters are mortifyingly tongue-tied."⁵ While Bujalski is certainly the undisputed master of the awkward exchange, as any viewers of his debut *Funny Ha Ha* (2002) and follow-up features can attest, his fellow mumblecore-designated filmmakers also defy the frequent comparisons made to these and other dialogue-driven realist auteurs, namely Eric Rohmer's ardent self-examiners, Mike Leigh's plain-spoken pragmatists, or John Cassavetes' emotive trainwrecks. Even Jim Jarmusch's aloof hipsters are too self-admiring to be analogous; though largely by, for, and about hipsters, mumblecore is critical of hipsterdom's cooler-than-thou posturing.



ABOVE AND BELOW: *Humpday*





Hanna Takes the Stairs

Mumblecore is, as Geoff Pevere notes,

about people who hide their feelings behind a mask of carefully cultivated whatever-dude diffidence, but who haven't noticed the mask isn't fitting quite so well anymore...[It is] about people who are hard to like but impossible not to sympathize with. This is because all of the manifest bad behaviour on display is clearly the function of fear: fear of losing the past, fear of facing the future and fear of getting too close.⁶

As Pevere's characterization suggests, although improvised and unstylized, *mumblecore* does not ring precise as a descriptor; "searching", "fumbling", and "venturing" are more explicative of the characters and their relationship-wary, therapy-trained, irony-strapped generation's mode of social interaction. Or, as David Denby puts it, "It's the emotions that mumble."⁷

Akin to Ruby Rich's reformulation of New Queer Cinema as a film *moment* rather than *movement*, mumblecore mobilized and was motivated less by concerted effort or collective ideology than by increased access both industrial and political.⁸ Though with stakes far lower than the AIDS pandemic and Reagan-era discrimination that fuelled New Queer Cinema's eruption at the 1992 Sundance Film Festival, mumblecore similarly is inspired by a generation's disillusionment and poses an anarchistic alternative to the dominant system (homophobic Hollywood then, the blockbuster mentality now). Mumblecore's D.I.Y. collectives of artist-hyphenates bucking the system are also equal parts French New Wave (rebellious against the mid-century European "tradition of quality") and No Wave (the late 1970s and early 1980s downtown New York City alternative arts scene). Just as the newfound availability of faster film

stock and portable sound equipment made it possible for the *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics to strike for the streets, the mumblecorps has laptop editing technology along with access to digital cameras such as the Panasonic AG DVX 100 to thank; "It was a \$3,000 video camera that shot at the film frame rate, with warm colours that made it feel like film," [mumblecore auteur] Mark [Duplass] said. "Suddenly you could make a great-looking movie for \$1,000."⁹

Of course the availability of affordable, user-friendly equipment is never itself wholly a determinant. "It was a convergence of new technology and people feeling like movies didn't show how their lives were actually being lived," explains actress and mumblecore muse Greta Gerwig.¹⁰ Borne of necessity and inspiration, these films share unmistakable qualities of narrative and stylistic naturalism that, Bujalski recounted to *The Washington Post*, "grew out of his frustration with the failure of mainstream movies to speak to the circumstances of his life, even those films that purport to be about his peer group."¹¹ Calling most of those movies a "pack of lies," Bujalski has the postmodern savvy to know that while cinematography might be the "truthful documentation of something that is there," the process of editing is "completely manipulative and false."¹² As Bujalski's statement indicates, mumblecore filmmakers are informed by film history and post-structuralist theory learned in university film programs rather than the Hollywood trenches (Bujalski studied with Chantal Akerman and documentary filmmaker Robb Moss at Harvard, Swanberg attended Southern Illinois-Carbondale, Aaron Katz went to the North Carolina School of the Arts, and Lena Dunham is a graduate of Oberlin). In another departure, mumblecore's foremost exhibition space has been Austin's annual SXSW Festival, whose producer Matt Dentler is the chief patron of what Lim singles out as "the sole

significant American indie film wave of the last 20 years to have emerged outside the ecosystem of the Sundance Film Festival.¹³ These filmmakers are also singular in their prolificacy; Joe Swanberg makes films at the alarmingly Woody Allenesque rate of one (or more) per year, in addition to co-writing and directing the web series *Young American Bodies*, “a candid, no-holds-barred look at the intersecting love lives of six 20-somethings in Chicago,” that ran for four seasons (2006-2009) and remains viewable on IFC.com. Although the rest of the mumblecore produces at a somewhat slower pace, their output is still impressive for self-financed films.

Mumblecore productions are characterized by handheld cinematography, natural lighting, real locations, simple set-ups, an emphasis on facial close-ups, and few takes. “Probably 30 per cent of what shows up onscreen is a first take,” says [Mark’s brother and creative collaborator Jay] Duplass.¹⁴ This improvisatory approach tends to produce a self-selecting cast flexible and willing enough to work for little (or no) money and to provide the bulk of their characters’ dialogue. Bujalski, who compares the role of a screenplay in his films to that of sheet music for a rock band, shoots in sequence and only shows actors the scenes in which they appear (a technique he learned from Woody Allen) to enhance the lifelike feeling of being privy only to those instances when we are present. Given these gestures towards sustenance and simplicity, perhaps the less pejorative neologism “slow film” gets closest to the mode and mood of what we’ve been calling mumblecore. As Susan Morrison describes it,

[Slow film] refers to a type of art film that while seemingly minimalist, in fact requires intense audience concentration and effort to produce meaning. By this neologism, I mean to draw an analogy between the recent phenomenon in cooking (and eating) habits termed the “Slow Food” Movement wherein time functions as an arbiter and guarantor of good taste, with those films that work off similar emphases of duration, films that reject the flashier aspects of Hollywood filmmaking...short takes, rapid editing, continuously moving camera and action, etc.... substituting instead a much slower approach to crafting a film.¹⁵

That the localism promoted by the Slow Food Movement intrinsically characterizes mumblecore productions, which rarely stray far from their filmmakers’ backyards and the twentysomething ghettos of Austin, Boston, Brooklyn, Chicago, and Seattle. I take up below how temporality’s crucial importance to narrative is perhaps mumblecore’s most defining characteristic, for the way it enhances understandings of character and story essential to rendering narrative realism. Even if, as a descriptor of contemporary U.S. art cinema, “slow film” also would encompass the less dialogue-driven, more stylized films of Sofia Coppola, Kelly Reichardt, and Gus Van Sant.

This confluence of sensibilities among disparate filmmakers whose works screened at SxSW in 2005 was followed by a 2007 series at New York’s IFC Film Center called “The New Talkies: Generation D.I.Y.,” grouping the films in a box office-friendly way that also, Chuck Tryon notices, “characterized the filmmakers as virtual revolutionaries, not unlike those who produced the ‘talkies’ that radically changed cinema in the 1920s.”¹⁶ Mumblecore’s revolution, such as it is, forges a counter-cinema

to circumvent the Hollywood hierarchy and all it represents: rampant commercialism, juvenile product, and (given multinational conglomerate ownership) human and environmental exploitation. That D.I.Y. culture has been resuscitated in this wintry economic climate is no coincidence, and mumblecore is merely one of its manifestations in the movement against excess waste, outsourced manufacturing, and deficit financing. Sizing up American society in the decade following 9/11, A.O. Scott observes that “magical thinking has been elevated from a diversion to an ideological principle,” and suggests that neo-realism’s “engagement with the world as it is might reassert itself as an aesthetic strategy.”¹⁷ Tracing the neo-realist impulse’s global movement since its origins in post-World War II Italy, Scott ventures that neo-realism “might be thought of less as a style or genre than as an ethic....” With Hollywood hooked on spinning \$100+ million yarns of escapist denial or (occasionally) self-aggrandizing heroism, refusing either to hawk or to swallow these wish-fulfillment fantasies becomes an ethical imperative.

It may seem rich to offer plaudits to self-involved, only minimally exploited underachievers who are more disillusioned than disenfranchised, and whose films would hardly seem to cure the ills of our world. In my (and the mumblecore’s) defense, however, I submit that these filmmakers collectively demonstrate a degree of humility that is refreshing in U.S. cinema—in speaking only for oneself, in making do with minimal resources, and in portraying life as awkward, messy, and morally complex, in which, to quote Jean Renoir, “everyone has his reasons.”¹⁸ Mumblecore plots emerge from characters, focus on everyday details and ordinary speech, and stay rooted in real life even when there are extraordinary circumstances. That one of the leads in Bujalski’s *Beeswax* (2009) is paraplegic, for example, goes unremarked upon for the film’s entirety. Where it would be the protagonist’s defining characteristic in a Hollywood film, here it is represented simply as the ordinary state of being that it realistically would be. Endings, or what passes for them, are frequently inconclusive and rarely reassuring in mumblecore: the couple breaks up, the dilemma remains unresolved, the protagonist is left unfulfilled, or—as in the case of *Funny Ha Ha*, the final scene cuts to black in mid-sentence. “There wasn’t anything specific that was trying to be achieved with those films, as much as just finding what seemed interesting and alive—those moments,” remarks Gerwig.¹⁹ Yet this rhizomatic accumulation of (mostly missed) moments yields far more than mere fragments.

To those who fault mumblecore for ignoring such glaring 21st century conflicts as the wars in the Middle East, writer-director Swanberg responds, “The story of my life and my friends’ lives are the ones I can tell most completely.”²⁰ These educated, medicated, liberal, mostly white male heterosexuals (though not as white or male as they overwhelmingly have been painted) appear on screen not so much solipsistically as observationally and even self-critically, as Lim notes. “The filmmakers view their characters with empathy but don’t let them off the hook; Mr. Swanberg and Mr. Bujalski often assign themselves the least flattering roles available.”²¹ Mumblecore characters are not disaffected and sexually detached in the way of Whit Stillman, Wes Anderson, and so much contemporary hipster literature (“hip lit”); rather, they are emotionally yearning yet painfully aware of the danger in revealing oneself. As Taubin notes, “non-actors are perfect choices for these films because [of] their insecurity and embarrassment about voicing their

characters' ideas, desires, and feelings."²² Some of mumblecore's subtlest pleasures come from registering the minute contrapuntal play between verbal and physical language, whose inconsistencies of meaning announce loudly our shared tendency to suppress our true emotions. Witness what happens when *Funny Ha Ha*'s lead Marnie (Kate Dollenmayer) is goaded into speaking openly: she loses first her livelihood (having replied honestly when her boss asks whether she likes her job), then her dignity (having confessed to being unrequitedly in love with a male friend).

That Bujalski, an exception among the mumblecore directors for sticking to the staggeringly more expensive medium of film, is a film purist is evident from his choice to shoot second feature *Mutual Appreciation* (2005) in artsy black and white (another nod to Allen), and from the collectible 16mm film strip enclosed in every DVD copy of *Beeswax*. Yet mumblecore's intimate, dialogue-driven aesthetic is well-suited to the digital video format as well as home viewing and mobile media. Though less austere than the Vow of Chastity mandates, mumblecore certainly displays Dogme's imprint, as well as that of observational documentary and its bastard child, reality television. One might even say that mumblecore exhibits a symptomatic anxiety of influence that drives it to improve upon the deficiencies sully those antecedents. As Swanberg observes, "We grew up in the age of the home video. We're used to having our lives documented at every stage. Reality TV shows are an extension of that, and this is the next stage. Like the home movie you actually want to watch."²³ Mumblecore's "life as a movie" gonzo exhibitionism, Lim claims, "bespeaks a true 21st century sensibility, reflective of MySpace-like social networks and the voyeurism and intimacy of YouTube."²⁴ Yet web-based modes of communication and those who rely too heavily on them is subject to critique in mumblecore—especially Swanberg's *LOL* (2006)—in which the tendency is to pine nostalgically for the lost art of personal interaction. It is this yearning to connect, non-virtually and in real time, that drives characters in mumblecore films—and their fans, very much children of 9/11, who despite irony's ostensible death must seek out the sincerity and hopefulness missing from so much postmodern media.

Anointed godfather of mumblecore, Bujalski shepherded his first feature *Funny Ha Ha* through largely viral distribution channels, "always aware that the films he was making were the kind that were meant to be stumbled over and discovered."²⁵ Three years after the film's completion and still not 30 years old, Bujalski was selling homemade bootlegs of the film off his website while working part-time as a substitute teacher when a "Someone to Watch" prize at the 2004 Independent Spirit Awards and inclusion on A.O. Scott's "10 best films of 2005" list attracted a private investor to finance a wider DVD distribution. The earliest mumblecore feature to earn a Sundance premiere, the Duplass brothers' *The Puffy Chair* (2005) received an Independent Spirit Award nomination and was acquired by Netflix and Roadside Attractions, who aggressively promoted the film to Netflix subscribers. That model of festival debut followed by digital distribution, foregoing theatres entirely, largely characterizes mumblecore's release pattern and clearly signals how outmoded the theatrical-nontheatrical distinction has become (no matter the Academy Awards' unflagging idolization of theatrical films). As Swanberg says, he's "come to realize that my festival run is my theatrical run."²⁶ His 2009 film *Alexander the Last* debuted simultaneously at SxSW and on IFC's video-on-demand (VOD) service, prompting him to proclaim, "I feel like this is a

watershed moment. The promise of the digital revolution, this democratization of movies, is now really happening."²⁷

Having come a long way since the initial "day and date" fizzle of Steven Soderbergh's *Bubble* release in 2005, digital distribution offers specialty cinema a new lease on life by way of circulating marginal product among a diffuse viewing community, through specialized channels that serve to maintain brand integrity while managing financial risk. The noticeable result, Tryon suggests, is "to create more dispersed film audiences based less on geographic proximity than on shared cinematic tastes."²⁸ Theatrical distributor IFC Films and its sister cable network the Independent Film Channel deserve particular credit for "sustain[ing] cinephile content" through a multi-platform mode of digital delivery that puts specialty films in a small number of theaters often simultaneously adding them to its VOD service, notes Lucas Hilderbrand, "yet the survival of such so-called independent cinema seems to depend upon multimedia ownership."²⁹ IFC is supported by a deep-pocketed, non-intrusive parent company (Rainbow Media Group, a division of behemoth U.S. cable service operator Cablevision), and fueled by the occasional indie hit such as *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002). Filling the role left vacant by faltering studio specialty divisions, shuttered screening venues, and defunct distributors, IFC and its ilk embody a newfangled style of vertical integration that paradoxically allows for the emergence of young artists and riskier content.

Where specialty cinema is concerned, "risky content" can equal what's quaintly termed "adult material" but can also refer to the opposite of high concept: films that are hard to promote because they lack name actors, provocative premises, or even an easily encapsulated plot. That the former often serves to mollify the latter has long made otherwise abstruse material palatable to audiences attracted by scintillating content. Among mumblecore directors, Swanberg broaches sex with the most candor: *Kissing on the Mouth* (2005) opens with a close-up of a condom being rolled onto an erect penis, and a subsequent scene shows Swanberg's character masturbating and ejaculating in the shower. Clearly meant to attract as well as to provoke, nonetheless Swanberg's emphasis is always on naturalism. In the first scene of his film *Nights and Weekends* (2008), a newly reunited long-distance couple makes love with the pent-up desire of two people utterly familiar with each other yet emotionally disconnected. As other critics have noted, mumblecore uses nudity less to titillate than to reveal private moments and to express intimacy between characters,³⁰ whether in mundane scenarios such as getting dressed, or in moments of whimsy such as the bathtub duet on trumpet of the *1812 Overture* performed by a fully nude man and woman that closes out Swanberg's *Hannah Takes the Stairs* (2007).

With a premise that resembles, if only superficially, a Judd Apatow bromance—two straight guys propose to have sex on camera for a pornographic "art project"—Lynn Shelton's *Humpday* (2005) found limited theatrical distribution by, she confesses, playing up its "sexy hook" shamelessly. It went on to gross nearly \$500,000 at the box office, by far the best performance by a mumblecore film up until that time though still not sufficient to stay on screen long.³¹ *Humpday* takes the bromantic theme of dude-on-dude love and soberly sizes it up to consider what gets lost when heteronormativity (rather than women) divides friendships between men. Ben (Mark Duplass) and Andrew (Joshua Leonard) are college buddies who went their separate ways, but are brought back together when

adventurous Andrew suddenly reappears seeking respite from his nomadic existence amidst Ben's buttoned-down life and comfortable marriage. The guys get inebriated at a bohemian artists' party and challenge each other to collaborate on a surefire competition winner for a local amateur porn festival; as the day of the shoot approaches, they act increasingly anxious yet resolutely determined not to back down. The impetus for *Humpday* "simply a curiosity about why so many straight men fear gay sex," explains Shelton, who is married to a man but describes herself as having "definite bisexual leanings." "Even if they think of themselves as really progressive and open-minded, and they don't care if the rest of the world is gay," she says, "it's very important that everybody knows that they are straight and that they themselves can be assured that they are straight."³² As sex advice columnist Dan Savage remarked of Shelton, "she's really calling the bluff of the Apatows of the world. How far can you go with the 'I love you, man' stuff and still be straight guys? And Lynn is saying you can go all the way."³³

Humpday's sexual politics inspired vigorous debate among critics, some of who praised the film as "widen[ing] the definition of straightness"³⁴ while still "challeng[ing] homophobic fears that somehow people can be converted into becoming gay."³⁵ Others felt it avoided any genuine exploration of homosexuality by depicting Ben and Andrew "as blobs of flesh with hairy parts but without the tiniest suggestion of latent heat,"³⁶ and by being "less about the blurring boundaries of male friendship than an examination of a classic alpha-male power struggle."³⁷ In the two scenes from *Humpday* that rattle heteronormativity's cage most vigorously, Andrew's broad-minded pose is shaken during a threesome with a lesbian couple who insist on using a dildo, followed by Ben's admission of having had a crush on a male video store employee. That neither scene is played for laughs constitutes *Humpday's* clearest departure from the bromance. Even what happens when Ben and Andrew finally face one another, camera running, can be regarded as among the most serious treatment given to "straight" men exploring their sexuality that I can recall seeing in American film (1996's *The Daytrippers* and 2000's *Chuck and Buck* are others).

What occasionally gets lost in the debate over *Humpday's* same-sex grappling is the importance of the heterosexuality on display as well, namely in its honest depiction of longtime couples' struggle to maintain an active, passionate sex life in balance with everyday obligations. Perhaps not so surprising given that it was written and directed by a woman, the generous treatment given the role of Ben's wife Anna (Alycia Delmore) soundly departs from the bromance's handling of the women-folk, who exist near-exclusively as hindrances to males' bonding and fun. Anna is hardly supportive of the guys' scheme to shoot a porno, but she is neither pushover nor shrew. As the most grounded and self-knowing of the trio, she is realistically perturbed but at the same time committed to (understanding, supporting, and loving) Ben as well as respectful and encouraging of his and Andrew's friendship. The female leads of Aaron Katz's *Dance Party USA* (2006) and *Quiet City* (2007) are preternaturally mature and whimsically girlish, respectively, but they share with *Humpday's* Anna and each other a steadiness and patience that keeps them oriented while offering ballast to the men who enter their lives (without being their saviors or safe havens). These women's own growth is privileged as well as predicated on enabling the men to own up to themselves: in *Dance Party USA*, Katz's first feature, a callous lothario admits to

having date-raped a drunk underage girl and attempts to make amends; in *Quiet City*, a heartbroken young man's emotional isolation is finally punctured by the persistence and trust extended by the next woman he meets.

An indisputable truth of film movements is that they have nearly always been boys' clubs, from the *Cahiers* comrades to British lads' Kitchen Sink films to the easy riders and raging queens of New Hollywood and New Queer Cinema. The only exception, women's counter-cinema of the 1970s, was by its very definition female-driven. Mumblecore has been served its share of sexism complaints, yet counts several women in its ranks, including Ry Russo-Young (*Orphans*, 2007) and So Yong Kim (*Treeless Mountain*, 2008). Shelton, who balances directing with acting and photography, admits in a *New York Times* interview that her path to independent filmmaking was determined by her gender. "I just did not have the confidence to do it," she said. "And then I had to find a backdoor way in. I couldn't even go to film school, I had to start making my little movies and learning about editing."³⁸ Whereas Shelton's "distinctly feminist sensibility comes to bear in the subtle, almost anthropological scrutiny of the male of the species," as her interviewer comments,³⁹ Lena Dunham's unabashed display of her decidedly realistic physique in her directorial debut feature *Tiny Furniture* (2010) garnered acclaim for its defiance of oppressive beauty norms even as it was alleged to encourage voyeurism and the evaluation of women according to physical criteria.

Perhaps to challenge the allegations of sexual immaturity and misogyny dogging Swanberg's earlier features, on the unscripted *Nights and Weekends* he shares writing credit with co-star Gerwig, and the greater sensitivity her character receives as a result is largely responsible for making it Swanberg's most affecting work yet. The film's melancholy, level look at a couple trying to save their disintegrating relationship is under-dramatized yet poignant and heartbreaking, and rings completely true. The question of how, and how well, monogamy functions over time is also taken up by *The Freebie* (2010), the directorial debut of mumblecore actor (and wife of Mark Duplass) Katie Aselton. Yet my response to *The Freebie*, in which a married couple, honestly acknowledging their desire to have other sexual experiences, agree to spend one night with other people, is emphatically mixed. While its premise and initial exposition are in keeping with mumblecore's commitment to representing authentic-feeling (and thereby not always terribly dramatic) personal interactions, its denouement departs from the logic of character and verisimilitude established up to that point.

In *Funny Ha Ha's* end credits, the ratio of people thanked to cast and crew members is roughly 10:1. But moonlighting as an actor can prove a much more difficult gig in one's thirties than in one's twenties. "As I get older and my friends get older," Bujalski said, "it's harder to say to people, 'Take a month off from your life and work for me for free.'"⁴⁰ It is reported that next Bujalski will write and direct an adaptation of Benjamin Kunkel's best-selling novel *Indecision* for the producer Scott Rudin; as he pragmatically admits, "if I have kids that need to go to college, maybe I'll say yes to a studio movie. It would be good to turn naturalism into a crowd pleaser."⁴¹ Aaron Katz, recently honored with a Harvard Film Archive retrospective of his diminutive *oeuvre* (just three films), adapted mumblecore to the gumshoe genre with his latest feature, *Cold Weather* (2010). Presumably an attempt to break out of the mumblecore mold, the film's genre machinations clumsily if comically shoehorn Katz's lyrical charm into a somewhat restrictive casing, as did

the Duplass Brothers' lackluster attempt to incite real horror while riffing on the slasher movie in *Baghead* (2008). Their \$7 million *Cyrus* (2010), starring John C. Reilly, Marisa Tomei, and Jonah Hill and released by Fox Searchlight, was a more successful melding of what might be called "studio mumblecore". The only filmmakers in the mumblecore to relocate to L.A., the brothers so far have managed well under studio oversight. "Sometimes there was an effort made on our part to stabilize the camera a little bit, to zoom just a little bit less," said Claudia Lewis, Fox Searchlight's president for production, speaking about the *Cyrus* shoot. "But it's very important to them that they stay true to their style, and that was important to us too."⁴² Lately they have branched into television (FX ensemble comedy *The League*) and are soon to release *Jeff Who Lives at Home*, starring Jason Segal and Susan Sarandon. Lynn Shelton cast two name (indie) actresses, Rosemarie DeWitt and Emily Blunt, alongside Mark Duplass in her upcoming feature *Your Sister's Sister*, though selecting to shoot once more in her native Seattle. Lena Dunham is at work on a Judd Apatow-produced (natch) television comedy series about the lives of a group of twentysomething girls. And mumblecore's It girl no more, Greta Gerwig has appeared in increasingly prominent roles in increasingly mainstream films from *Greenberg* (2010) to *No Strings Attached* (2011) to *Arthur* (2011) with the latter's romantic sweetheart role a 180 degree departure from the capricious sylphs of her mumblecore days.

Writing in 2010, Hilderbrand places us in a "post-mumblecore moment."⁴³ Whether moment, movement, wave, or some other formulation, are we really to imagine mumblecore is past, or just sufficiently dispersed so as to escape its categorical confines? Films fitting the bill continue to be released—*Momma's Man* (Azazel Jacobs, 2008), *Daddy Longlegs* (Ben and Joshua Safdie, 2009), the German feature *Everyone Else* (Maren Ade, 2009)—though mostly shorn of the mumblecore label. The 2010 Sundance festival initiated a section devoted to low/no-budget films shot on DV by filmmakers under 32. While hardly going cold turkey from their CGI extravaganzas, studios are also taking notes from mumblecore filmmakers. Paramount's Insurge is a new micro-budget arm created to fund 10 projects at \$100,000 each per year (a true mumblecore budget would make it impossible to conform to union regulations). But perhaps the most glaring sign yet that the movement is verging on going mainstream was the November 2010 *New York* magazine spread promoting clever and hip holiday gifts, including a \$500 fire-engine red turntable for your "mumblecore boyfriend."⁴⁴

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Notes

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Slow Fuse

THE CINEMATIC STRATEGIES OF TSAI MING-LIANG

BY MARC SAINT-CYR



Tsai Ming-Liang

Over the last two decades, Tsai Ming-Liang has proved his considerable worth as an artist with an assortment of strange, haunting films. Like Hou Hsiao-Hsien and the late Edward Yang, the other two principal figures of Taiwanese cinema with whom he is so often associated, he has relied heavily on such methods as long takes, stationary camera compositions and minimal dialogue. Yet he has also distinguished his unique authorial voice primarily through such reoccurring elements as sexuality, the human body, water and other fluids, urban life, loneliness, tributes to beloved artists like Grace Chang and François Truffaut and the continual onscreen presence of Lee Kang-Sheng, about whom Tsai has gone so far as to say that he will never make a film without him.¹ As he has risen to become one of contemporary cinema's most relevant directors, his stance has remained in stark opposition to the practices and mentalities of mainstream cinema. If his films themselves weren't proof enough, Tsai has repeatedly voiced in interviews and post-screening talks his allegiance to art films and personal visions in a global film market increasingly congested with standardized, Hollywood-style products assembled for the primary aim of making money. On one such occasion, he stated the following:

If film is art, then the work should be an artist's reflections, rather than something catering to the mass public. There are, of course, some commercial films that exceed expectations and become great art. But I know I am not interested in making films just to make a profit. My film work is my own creation; it is inseparable from my life experience.²

His adherence to such beliefs has produced works that provide immersive, challenging viewing experiences orchestrated according to his specific approach to settings and characters. Indeed, to echo a comment Roger Ebert once made about Andrei Tarkovsky's films,³ Tsai doesn't focus on telling stories so much as crafting cinematic spaces that urge audiences towards a state of contemplation. Shots and cuts aren't designed to briskly propel his characters from one scene and plot point to the next, but rather have the opposite effect. As a result, the characters are allowed to simply live under the camera's gaze in apartments, corridors and public settings, their habits, mannerisms, quirks and desires gradually made more familiar. Acutely showcasing his unmistakable gift for capturing authentic human behavior and the sacred moments of stillness that litter everyday life, Tsai's films are very much concerned with the rewards to be gained from watching, waiting—*lingering*.

Goodbye, Dragon Inn (2003) features such priorities pushed to the extreme. Depicting an old Taipei movie house's final night of service, it is essentially a minimalist tone poem delivered over the course of eighty-two minutes. Dialogue is only spoken in a scant few scenes, the first one appearing at roughly the halfway mark. The small assortment of characters consists of spectators scattered throughout the theatre and two staff members played by Tsai regulars Lee

and Chen Shiang-Chyi. Small actions and details like Chen's limping steps, the numerous shifts between seats, cigarette breaks, snacking and the rain outside serve as major focal points for the audience's attention. *Dragon Inn* (1967), the rousing, King Hu-directed martial arts film playing on the aged screen, provides a bold contrast to Tsai's film, which quietly culminates in the building's painstakingly subdued evacuation and closure.

Such characteristics make *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* seem like the ideal text to turn to for an examination of Tsai's stylistic methods. However, that particular film can be a misleading representative of his capabilities, as he has elsewhere taken on more substantial thematic, character and story elements.⁴ In a way, *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* signifies something of an anomaly in his body of work; a meditative deviation from his other, similarly slow-paced yet more emphatically structured films. Tsai tends to invest his narratives with an understated but nonetheless well-defined sense of trajectory and momentum integrated into his contemplative approach, creating a richly interactive experience for viewers. The pressurized tensions within his main characters steadily escalate towards a clearly defined high point, resulting in an emotionally charged release. Such exercises reveal a confident ability to marry theme and plot that is brought to the fore in enormously rewarding moments

of cinematic cohesion. Three key works—*The Hole* (1998), *What Time is it There?* (2001) and *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* (2006)—will be examined to illustrate more fully how Tsai crafts his films to resemble slow fuses that steadily yet inevitably burn towards detonation.

***The Hole* (1998)**

From its opening sequence onwards, *The Hole* immediately sets itself apart from Hollywood fare by adopting an idiosyncratic approach to a well-worn genre: the apocalyptic disaster film. With its main premise surrounding a mysterious epidemic that causes a city-wide evacuation of Taipei, *The Hole* is essentially an end-of-the-world movie, though one molded according to Tsai's sensibilities. The opening title sequence indicates as much, as the disaster is established in a simple, economical manner through a radio broadcast. Thus, the central event that would have served as a commercial venture's *raison d'être* built upon scenes of large, panicked crowds and destructive spectacle is here boiled down to an off-screen occurrence. With the broadcast, which also establishes the film's city setting before a single image has appeared, Tsai provides the first clue that he is not interested in making a conventional disaster film so much as conducting a study of how people live and interact (or, more precisely, are unable to do

The Hole



so) in urban environments. Restricted to a nearly empty apartment building and an indoor market, the spaces occupied by the characters consist of dingy, puddle-filled hallways, leaky apartments and dark stairwells—essentially a claustrophobic, man-made labyrinth made all the more stifling by the torrential downpour of rain that carries on throughout the film. As per his customary habits, Tsai eschews an original score and primarily uses long takes to record his two main characters Hsiao-Kang /Lee Kang-Sheng and the unnamed woman who lives directly below him (Yang Kuei-Mei). Many of the scenes are spent on small, seemingly insignificant tasks and chores: meal preparations; unsuccessful attempts to halt leakages; Hsiao-Kang's routine of opening, running and closing his market stall, even though he has barely any customers to serve. Despite the arrival of a major emergency, mundane habits are still stubbornly upheld, material goods still sought, accumulated and consumed. The sensual quality of Hsiao-Kang and Yang's world is defined perhaps most vividly by the many sounds that fill the soundtrack: the crinkling of plastic packaging, dripping leaks, a hissing gas burner, the occasional radio or television program and, of course, the never-ending rain. Actual words are not so important, and indeed, verbal communication is noticeably sparse both in this and other films of Tsai's.

Hsiao-Kang and Yang themselves don't speak face-to-face until thirty-five minutes into the film, their words only consisting of a very brief, formal exchange regarding the hole between their apartments. Through their peculiar relationship, Tsai cleverly highlights the habits of self-imposed seclusion all too present in contemporary society. It is highly amusing to note that, out of all of the available spaces in their apartment building, Hsiao-Kang and Yang live in such close proximity to one another, yet *still* maintain private personal lives. One can sense a sort of restless glee in the way Tsai disrupts their routines through the intrusive incidents put into motion by the hole's appearance. The first one is a small triumph of comedic timing: Yang enjoys a moment of calm as she stands in the middle of her apartment with her face upturned, only to receive a face full of powdery foundation that trickles down onto her from above. An action-reaction dynamic eventually emerges: Hsiao-Kang, after a night of drinking, vomits into the hole; Yang cleans up the mess. He peeks into her apartment; she sprays him with bug repellent, causing him to cover the hole with a pot lid. He uses his faucet; she is deprived of water until he is finished.

Such occurrences and more direct yet ultimately ineffective attempts at communication (a note left on a door, unanswered buzzers) are punctuated by four musical sequences that might take place in either character's imagination, or be wholly isolated, non-diegetic events. Each one set to a different Grace Chang song, they provide colorful departures from the rest of the film's aesthetic while not quite making the full jump into the realm of glossy Hollywood productions. Instead, they have a low-budget feel about them, perhaps best exemplified in the introductory rendition of "Calypso" with its wavering spotlight, simple decoration provided by blinking lights and Yang's costume and the single take in which the camera slowly moves towards her dancing figure, then pulls back. It becomes apparent that the songs give voice to emotions that otherwise go undeclared, specifically illustrating Yang's feelings of both annoyance and affection towards Hsiao-Kang and, in the last number, underlining her affliction with the illness.

In the film's final movement, the characters' situations

become markedly more serious, the tone more despairing and the surrounding forces of city and weather more intense and invasive. Another long take that indicates Tsai's ability to elaborate upon a given situation in a single shot shows Yang curled up on her bed, her poor health made clear by her loud, slurping breaths. Many seconds later, she turns on her light, suddenly revealing the water trickling down the walls around her. The outpouring of sobs that follows makes her utter helplessness complete. As she reverts to cockroach-like behavior (a pre-established symptom of the disease) and hides in the mound of paper towel products she has stockpiled in her home, Hsiao-Kang's concern for her grows increasingly apparent. Having cleared away the rubble and dirt around the hole, he attacks it with a hammer, his aggressive pounding accompanied by desperate calls to her and, eventually, his own weeping. Not only does his sadness complement hers from moments before, but it is also easily the most outgoing expression of emotion from him thus far, emphasizing the bleak depths the story has now reached.

But then, when all hope seems to be lost, a truly miraculous event occurs. In a perfectly framed shot, Hsiao-Kang's arm descends into her apartment from above, first offering the panting Yang a glass of water, then pulling her up through the hole. The following shot, and final one of the film, is presented in the same style as the musical numbers, playing one last Chang song as Hsiao-Kang and Yang, now respectively wearing a white suit and red dress, slowly dance in his apartment. Following the previously grim events, Tsai lets hope prevail in a moment of pure happiness in which all barriers have been transcended and the two lost souls are finally united, their feelings no longer withheld from one another.

***What Time is it There?* (2001)**

In *What Time is it There?* Tsai constructs a noticeably more sophisticated picture of spiritual emptiness and confusion in the modern world. This time around, the contrivance of a devastating virus is not required to create a sense of estrangement between the key players, who are afflicted with a certain incompleteness in their lives. Fitting in that regard is the film's integral motif of absence, which occupies the two main storylines. The film opens with the death of an old man (Tien Miao), leaving behind his son Hsiao-Kang (Lee), and his wife (Lu Yi-Ching). She becomes obsessed with bringing her husband's spirit back into their apartment, throwing herself into Buddhist ceremonies and the preparation of lavish feasts for him. Hsiao-Kang, scared of the dark and eventually annoyed by the rituals, takes to secluding himself in his room and urinating into plastic bags and water bottles so as to avoid going outside. By day, he sells watches on a busy overpass where he meets Shiang-Chyi (Chen Shiang-Chyi) shortly before she takes off on a trip to Paris and, after some haggling, sells her his own dual-time watch. Seemingly inspired by his encounter with her, he assigns himself a personal mission to change as many clocks as he can to Paris time, which humorously results in his mother assuming that her husband is partial to that specific timeframe. On the other side of the world, Shiang-Chyi explores the city of Paris in a state of aimlessness and insecurity.

Time's focus shifts between Hsiao-Kang, his mother and Shiang-Chyi as they effectively isolate themselves in their separate lives, busying themselves with ultimately empty pursuits. In the hands of a different filmmaker, the story elements in play here (a father's death, the fleeting possibility of a romance, acts



of love carried out as quirky public stunts) might have been presented in a more remarkable, perhaps even over-the-top manner. Instead, Tsai keeps things low-key and restrained, only breaking the calm for a select few moments, the most violent of which being the tense clash between mother and son over her decision to cut the apartment's power so as to better please the father's spirit. In fact, one can gain a sense of how tightly Tsai controls the film's tone by paying special attention to its editing. At numerous points, he skips ahead in the narrative by cutting away from a particular event or situation to a later point in time. The most significant example is in the first two shots, in which a long take resting on the old man gives way to Hsiao-Kang sitting in the backseat of a moving car, his father's ashes resting in his lap. This device has a two-fold effect: it shows Tsai's efficient management of screen time while also stressing the fleeting quality of the images and the moments they present. No matter how long a take might be, it is always endangered by the inevitable arrival of the next cut and the possibly drastic changes it could bring about.

As if in response to this, Tsai takes many opportunities throughout *Time* to enrich certain shots with subtle yet playful features that hinge upon time as if to further stress his unsuspecting characters' ceaseless passage into the future. Some shots' lengths are made more pronounced by metrical sound effects that mark the passage of screen time: Hsiao-Kang's steady clanging of a new unbreakable watch against a metal post, cooked ducks being chopped up at a food stall, the oft-repeated sounds of footsteps both in Shiang-Chyi's hotel room and out on the streets, the ticking time pieces and chiming alarm clocks that so often surround Hsiao-Kang. Often, the long shot durations give viewers sufficient time for their eyes to

explore and search the multi-layered images, many of which contain cunningly placed subjects worthy of attention. Sometimes, the focal point will be fairly obvious, such as the television on which Hsiao-Kang watches *The 400 Blows* or the clock that counts upwards as he avoids detection in a maintenance room of some kind, the shot length emphasized even more by the visual measurement of the passing seconds. In a subtler instance, the mother warns Hsiao-Kang not to harm a bug that could be his reincarnated father. Ignoring her, he puts it in their fish tank where, in the corner of the frame, the fish gobbles it up and proceeds to swim around lazily as she sits down to her dinner, unaware of the insect's fate. Objects specifically linked to characters' innermost yearnings are also placed in certain compositions, often so unobtrusively that viewers could miss them. Nonetheless, they are there: when Shiang-Chyi is shown lying in her bed in Paris, Hsiao-Kang's watch can be seen on her bedside table, thousands of miles away from its previous owner. Similarly, the box holding the cake that she gives to him as a gift of gratitude can be seen sitting on his car's dashboard multiple times following her departure. The subtle way in which these tokens are presented compliments the subdued nature of Hsiao-Kang and Shiang-Chyi's connection, which is built more upon the possibility of love than love itself. Notably, in the few scenes they share together, they barely show any signs of personal interest in one another, instead talking business about his watch. Only when she gives him the cake and he looks at her as she walks away does there seem to be a glimmer of promise for affection between them. From this point onwards, Tsai gives the potency of the brief encounter its due, nurturing the delicate connection that organically develops between his two subjects with the utmost patience over the



I Don't Want to Sleep Alone

course of this and later films.

But in *Time*, it becomes apparent that Hsiao-Kang and Shiang-Chyi aren't searching for a connection with each other so much as just a connection with anybody. While she initially inspires him to go about his clock-changing mission, her importance to him seems to steadily diminish, as indicated by the forgotten cake on his dashboard that he eventually chucks out of his car window, its meaning to him having expired. Shiang-Chyi appears desperate to find any sort of companionship in the strange city she finds herself. Apparently no other reason beyond an innocent wish to sight-see has brought her to Paris, but her encounters there impart little more, if anything, besides disillusionment, fear, uncertainty and, ultimately, heartbreak. A friendly face finally emerges in the form of a woman from Hong Kong (Cecilia Yip) who comforts her following a bout of sickness from drinking too much coffee with a glass of hot water and conversation in Mandarin. Shiang-Chyi is invited back to her room, setting the stage for *Time's* expertly arranged emotional climax—which can be more accurately described as an anti-climax, given the utterly unsatisfying sensations of emptiness experienced by all three main characters. The mother, having fully submitted to her grief, prepares for an imaginary "date" with her deceased husband, who is poignantly represented by yet another significantly placed object: a framed picture through which his eyes seem to study both his wife and the audience. She eventually masturbates on a bed while Hsiao-Kang spends a night on the town and ends up having sex with a prostitute in his car. Shiang-Chyi comes the closest to reaching genuine contentment: in bed with Yip's character, their bodies slowly move closer until they gently kiss. But soon afterwards, Yip slowly recoils, then turns away from Shiang-Chyi,

signaling with painful clarity that the moment has passed. Shiang-Chyi retreats to a barren park, where her tear-streaked face serves as a naked portrait of her sadness. Rarely has loneliness and disappointment been rendered so clearly in a film, though Tsai has ended films on these notes before, as seen in *Vive L'Amour* (1994) and *The River* (1997). However, *Time's* final moments supply some hope: Hsiao-Kang returns home to find his mother fast asleep and covers her with his jacket in a small act of reconciliation. And in Paris, small reminders of his continuing influence in Shiang-Chyi's life are put forth through his watch, which she retrieves before leaving Yip's room; the mysterious appearance of his father, who recovers her luggage after its abduction by mischievous children and, in the exquisite final shot, a Ferris wheel revolving counter-clockwise, mirroring Hsiao-Kang's efforts to turn back time.

Tsai would continue to sustain the possibility of love between Lee and Chen's characters in his short film *The Skywalk is Gone* (2002), in which they come tantalizingly close to meeting once more, before finally depicting their long-awaited convergence in *The Wayward Cloud* (2005). That film, with its water shortage premise and lavish fantasy scenes, places many ingredients reminiscent of *The Hole* into the Hsiao-Kang/Shiang-Chyi storyline, as if he wanted to treat the pair to an eccentric apocalyptic musical of their own.

***I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* (2006)**

Shot in Kuala Lumpur, capital of his birthplace Malaysia, *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* is Tsai's first film set entirely outside of Taiwan. This time, his gaze is mainly set on poor and marginalized immigrants who live in the city, expanding upon the cultural displacement Shiang-Chyi experienced in Paris in *Time*

In the final half-hour, Tsai brings about yet another of his catastrophes, this time plumes of toxic smoke from forest fires in Sumatra. The haze forces the city's inhabitants to don improvised face masks made from cloths and plastic bags and transforms the urban setting into an even more alien and hostile environment than the one previously shown. This development intensifies the urgency of the characters' ongoing attempts to find or make a safe shelter from the outside elements, which is perhaps best represented by the repeated image of the discarded mattress being moved across the city from one place to another. For a time, the cavernous derelict building where Rawang works almost becomes the perfect spot, though even there attempts at intimacy are totally sabotaged, as illustrated by the scene in which Hsiao-Kang and Chen's amorous embraces are halted by the suffocating fumes. But Tsai eventually grants his central trio the solace they seek in another perfect, summative final image. In, again, what could be an imagined dream space, Chen, Hsiao-Kang and Rawang peacefully rest together on the mattress as it

While Tsai regards François Truffaut as a major inspiration, his sensibilities are more closely aligned with another French auteur, Jacques Tati, whose mastery over the temporal, spatial and sonic properties of cinema and a gift for melding comedy with commentary and messages about the pitfalls of modernity make his films incredibly worthy of comparison to his Eastern counterpart. The two even resemble each other in the way they dodge conventional approaches to narrative in favor of crafting layer upon layer of sound, music, architecture, gags and human behavior that can take multiple viewings in order to be fully appreciated. But beyond these sensory details, there is the underlying consideration of simple, universal conditions such as despair, loneliness and longing that are carefully yet unmistakably given their due in Tsai's films. For while his approach may initially appear distant and methodical to the point of alienating certain viewers, he nonetheless demonstrates real concern for his characters, showing the effects, both harmful and otherwise, of the ever-shifting world of traffic, signs and surfaces they live in. The end goal they strive towards is, simply, the realization of love, their individual struggles made all the more affecting by the unaccommodating conditions in which they unfold. Whether they consist of the shocking sexual act that brings together Hsiao-Kang and Shiang-Chyi in *The Wayward Cloud* or the sublime parting shots of *The Hole* and *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*, those precious, long-awaited moments that Tsai grants his lost souls lay bare the beating heart that drives his work forwards, wholly justifying every second of screen time spent getting there.

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- 1 Peter van der Lugt and Ard Vijn, "IFFR 2010: An Interview with Tsai Ming-Liang," Twitch, December 9, 2009, accessed April 1, 2011, <http://twitchfilm.com/interviews/2010/12/iff-2010-an-interview-with-tsai-ming-liang.php>.
- 2 Tsai Ming-Liang, "On the Uses and Misuses of Cinema," *Senses of Cinema* Issue 58, 2011, accessed March 30, 2011, <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2011/feature-articles/on-the-uses-and-misuses-of-cinema/>.
- 3 Roger Ebert, "Solaris (1972)," *rogerebert.com*, January 19th, 2003, accessed March 30, 2011, <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=%2F20030119%2FREVIEWS08%2F301190301%2F1023>
- 4 This is not meant to ignore or discredit *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*'s own noteworthy accomplishments, most obvious among them a mournful consideration of a rapidly diminishing era of filmmaking and moviegoing.

The Invisible Catastrophe

LINGERING MOVEMENT AND DURATION IN *WERCKMEISTER HARMONIES*

BY EMRE CAGLAYAN

Examining contemporary art house cinema, critics have recognized a wave of films that react against the dominant conventions and norms of mainstream culture. Most famously termed as 'Slow Cinema' by Jonathan Romney, these films emerged in diverse national cinemas and attracted many viewers with the rise of film festival networks, funding schemes, and digital technologies affecting alternative production and distribution strategies.¹ Commonly featuring daily lives represented through long takes and the elision of dramatic events in favour of simple action and atmosphere, these projects offer, above all, an expanded experience of duration on screen and a contemplative engagement with the profilmic space. One of the leading filmmakers of this wave is the Hungarian director Béla Tarr, whose seven-hour long epic *Sátántangó* (1994) was long praised by intellectuals such as Susan Sontag and Jonathan Rosenbaum.² However, *Werckmeister Harmonies* (2000) marked an international breakout for Tarr, following its long tour of well-respected film festivals including Toronto, Berlin and New York. The film became a blueprint for Slow Cinema and was retrospectively selected as one of the thirty defining films of the 21st century cinema by *Sight and Sound*, which has since placed Tarr and Slow Cinema into the centre of scholarly attention.³

The highlight of *Werckmeister Harmonies* is its measured and laconic approach to its narrative subject. As paradoxical as it may sound, the film depicts a catastrophe by not showing its



The director Béla Tarr

exhaustive action. What is special about *Werckmeister Harmonies* is that its apocalyptic mood is not conveyed through familiar images of a devastating catastrophe sweeping through the ruins of a modern metropolitan city. Instead, Tarr portrays an enigmatic setting that represents humanity's metaphysical dead-end. Filmed in various towns located throughout the iconic Hungarian Plains, *Werckmeister Harmonies* epitomizes Tarr's disbelief in human nature and uses filmic space, time and movement not as subordinate elements to the narrative, but on the contrary, as the means to convey and shape it. Tarr breaks away from the conventional use of the long take and elaborates on duration and camera-work in a manner that is reminiscent of the modernist filmmaking that manifested itself during the 1960s. Governed by this modernist tendency, the film achieves a new form of engagement by avoiding the traditional commitments to narrative clarity, cause-effect linkage and characterization. The suppression of the narrative in favour of style leads to a dynamic, triangular relationship between the camera, the protagonist and the spectator, which provides the basis of our unique and contemplative engagement with the film's catastrophic atmosphere.

Werckmeister Harmonies is the outcome of the ongoing collaboration between Béla Tarr and writer László Krasznahorkai and is adapted from the central chapter of the latter's novel, *Melancholy of Resistance*.⁴ The story involves a town descending into madness, witnessed by the local newspaperman Janos/Lars Rudolph. In addition to his tedious job, Janos takes care of the eccentric Mr Eszter/Peter Fitz, an intellectual obsessed with Andreas Werckmeister and his music theory.⁵ While attending to his routine duties, Janos becomes aware of a certain rumour

regarding a circus arriving to the town, which will supposedly exhibit a giant carcass of a whale and include a freak show starring 'The Prince', a mysterious and grim figure. The townspeople become agitated with the ill-conceived circus and gather around the town square to voice their protest and anger. While this unexplained rage goes slowly out of control, Aunt Tünde/Hanna Schygulla visits Janos to reveal her intentions of taking advantage of this situation. Following a revolt where the angry mob storms the local hospital, Tünde sets up a sort of military dictatorship with the aid of a high-ranking military officer. Janos attempts an escape to no avail and finds himself in an asylum-like hospital, where Mr Eszter tells him how the new order is working. In the final scene, Eszter visits the whale, quietly sitting in the town square, its inscrutable glass eye bleached by light.

The catastrophe is left unidentified. The film presents us with a bleak vision of humanity that is indicative of post-apocalyptic iconography: stark black and white photography, tanks roaming in the streets, an extreme climate, unidentified characters and obscure events. However, contrary to the generic features of a disaster film, Tarr downplays narrative action into events leading nowhere. There's no narrative resolution, nor any causal links between events that take place. Why does the mob storm the hospital? Why do they stop? What affect does the Prince exactly radiate? How does the whale fit in this story? What benefit does Tünde and the military officers retain out of this situation? As much as we see on-screen, there's a great deal of information left either unexplained or off-screen. We cannot logically link the cause-effect chain in many cases simply because Tarr omits valuable and vital information from the story. We are shown large gaps of silence, a lot of walking, obscure dialogues, as opposed to motivations behind the events or any form of



explanation. In other words, the narrative is suppressed in favour of mood and atmosphere. But how does the film let us engage with it? What alternative devices fill in for the lack of narrative complexity?

Even though the themes of catastrophe and disaster are apparent in *Werckmeister Harmonies*, there is a tendency to eschew narrative action through an overt use of spatial narration. In the first scene and throughout the film, the spaces, places, faces and objects are continuously foregrounded against the narrative. Tarr focuses on objects and spaces that seem to be irrelevant to the narrative causality, which would normally motivate a conventional narration. Examples are the burning stove in the beer house and the suddenly appearing lamp, which Tarr prefers to linger on while it obscures the continuity of the scene. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson have argued that in the films of Yasujiro Ozu, spaces are foregrounded and are independent to the narrative to an unusual extent. The presentation of independent spaces and objects disrupt the spatial continuity and intervene in the cause-effect chain. The stylistic elements to produce such an effect, Bordwell and Thompson suggest, are cutaways, transitions, colour and focus.⁶ In many ways, Ozu's playful approach to editing is key to his attempt to subvert cinematic conventions. He largely ignores the 180-degree rule and deliberately excludes establishing shots to disorient his viewers, destabilize the narrative flow and reflect on cinematic style, common tendencies found within modernist film aesthetics.

Tarr, on the other hand, produces a similar effect by utilizing the long take. Tarr's film does not involve any abrupt transitions or cutaways; in fact there are very few cuts in the film. *Werckmeister Harmonies* consists of 39 shots (including the credits) averaging about 3.7 minutes, spread over 34 scenes. Most scenes, except three odd ones, are made up of single long takes, shot in a *plan-séquence* manner. Bordwell comments on this stylization: "the long take makes a stylistic unit (a shot) also a *syuzhet* unit (a scene), there is an unusually tight connection between narrative comprehension and spatial perception."⁷ Bordwell proposes that this is not only a matter of form matching content. Basically the transformation of the real time of the plot into filmic time in an equal manner, as opposed to condensing time into a shortened version, implies the unfolding of the narrative visually through the filmic space. In this respect, our understanding of the story lies with the cues represented to us throughout the spaces, and is dependent on our perception of these cues, which is influenced by the way in which the director constructs them.

In *Werckmeister Harmonies*, we can argue that the suppression of the narrative is substituted for a deeper perception of spatial dimensions within the film. But, how does Tarr's use of the long take differ from others? Throughout his filmography, there is an obsessive interest in *mise-en-scène*, framing, movement and an expanded sense of duration. I will argue that his unusual emphasis on camera and figure movement, framing and duration are key to his foregrounding of space and atmosphere. Each of these elements have their own unique effects upon the spectators, but commonly all of them influence our active engagement with the filmic space present in the image.

Mise-en-scène and Objective Correlative

Firstly, we should make a note on how Tarr uses specific locations and places to produce meanings. Tarr's treatment of the landscape, space and the built environment is similar to

Michelangelo Antonioni's in regards to the technique called "landscape-as-state-of-soul," about which Seymour Chatman writes that "the settings represent characters' states of mind."⁸ Chatman suggests that the spaces in Antonioni's films serve as an objective correlative in T.S. Eliot's sense: "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked."⁹ This refers to a narration that bases its storytelling on the surface, or the appearance of things through metonyms, rather than relying on metaphorical interpretations. In this sense, objects, places, events, or anything that bears a physical existence may become a reflection of the character or theme it is associated with. Chatman provides a plethora of examples ranging from objects to spatial elements for the objective correlative stemming from Antonioni's filmography. For instance, in *L'Avventura* (1960), Sandro and Claudia come across a deserted town while looking for their friend Anna. The town was built during the Fascist period as one of the community projects but it never appealed to the people for its association with the totalitarian regime.¹⁰ According to Chatman, the town not only documents the "disaster of Fascist architecture and planning," but also proves that "bad architecture is simply one visible, concrete manifestation of the *malattia dei sentimenti* [malady of emotional life: the existential anxiety that Antonioni refers to in his interviews and speeches]."¹¹ The alienation of the characters is matched by the town's physical state: empty, abandoned and forgotten. The correlation between the characters and the setting strengthens when Claudia asserts her inability to cope with the silence of the town and the couple decide to leave, showing their failure to connect even with a ghost town.

Tarr treats his settings in a similar manner, albeit with a different attitude and intention. He notes that one of his working methods includes gathering "impressions" from the settings before starting to shoot, impressions which have an enormous influence over his stylistic decisions.¹² Therefore, it is safe to say that his landscapes are more than backgrounds and they constitute a significant part of the overall film. For example, it is impossible to think of *Werckmeister Harmonies* without considering its desolate landscapes or rundown buildings as well as its dark, cold and muddy streets. However, it is not clear to what extent these settings provide mental spaces for his characters. Contrary to Antonioni's character-oriented narratives, Tarr does not intend for cinematic characterization, but uses the setting to create a unique cinematic atmosphere. Furthermore, Antonioni's use of setting as a critique of urban modernity and alienation provides a strict contrast in attitude against Tarr's portrayal of existential anxiety in a much more rural, local and philosophical context.

The depiction of the town square in *Werckmeister Harmonies* is a good example to demonstrate how Tarr uses the objective correlative to create an in-depth and meticulous atmosphere. We see the town square four times and its portrayal gradually changes between each long take. In the first one, Tarr depicts the square in a manner to arouse curiosity as the camera follows Janos walking through groups of people standing on the square. The hazy fog in the background and the eerie silence of dusk fuels our curiosity until the circus begins its operation. In the second scene, however, the depiction is slightly different. Kovács writes; "Tarr for the first time depicts the crowd assembling on the square not with the social empathy characteristic



of him, but as a terrifying, murderous mob."¹³ The square is now presented not as a social gathering space as usually depicted in the Western world, but rather a space of spectacle, protest and danger. Indistinguishable chatter and background noise replace the silence while the hazy fog slowly turns into smoke coming from bonfires. The uncertainty surrounding the square is escalated in the third take, portrayed during the night, as the bonfires become more visible and the crowds become more and more agitated. In the fourth depiction, also the final scene of the film, Tarr portrays the square with Mr Eszter looking at the aftermath of the events as the debris from the revolt covers the square. All seems to be lost, except for the absurd placement of the giant whale carcass in the centre of the square, which prepares the spectator and Mr Eszter towards an ambiguous closure.

A similar narration occurs during the portrayal of The Prince. The way the spectator encounters The Prince is through Janos, who breaks into the van and eavesdrops on the conversation between The Prince, his interpreter and the circus owner. The Prince is nothing but a shadow to us; he exists in relation to his surroundings and literally exists on the surface of a wall, while his aggressive monologue drives the masses to destroy order and unleash chaos. The prophet-like quality of The Prince is represented through a spatial narration in the aftermath of the revolt: the camera depicts the ceiling of a building from a low angle, slowly revolving around its own axis and ascending on

the vertical axis, therefore portraying the interiors of the building and eventually finding Janos reading a notebook. The image of the building in the beginning is suggestive of a church or a temple: the glass ceilings, the wooden stairways and archways turn into concrete walls and steel columns as the image descends within the building, and we realize the building is nothing but a plundered white furniture store. The sound in the beginning of the shot also evokes religious connotations: the echoing sounds are reminiscent of a priest recounting some hymns until we realize that it is Janos whispering the horrible acts written in the notebook. Through a combination of camera movement, sound and off-screen space, Tarr creates a moment of false expectation, or realisation, which functions as a visual clue to The Prince's character. The scene conveys the nature and essence of The Prince, as he may appear holy, but is in contrast destructive.

Apart from these individual spaces that bear specific meanings, there are other spaces that appear very frequently and play a significant role in the narration process. Statistically speaking, the most frequently appearing spaces are streets, which make up about 11 scenes within the film and should, presumably, play a significant role in establishing the spectator's grasp of the narrative. These scenes are generally shorter in duration, and are placed for the sake of connecting interiors and exteriors as they similarly function in city planning. In other words, they exist to maintain a logical spatial continuity.

However, there is a common activity in all of these scenes that is given a particular attention throughout the film.

Movement and *Flânerie*

Werckmeister Harmonies is a film about a man, Janos, walking, observing and witnessing. In an interview, Tarr was asked whether the film is an allegory of Hungary's totalitarian history or an elaborate depiction of man's descent into existential terror. His reply was: "I just wanted to make a movie about this guy who is walking up and down the village and has seen this whale."¹⁴ A particular interest in walking and seeing has been part of the film since its inception. All characters walk; there are no cars, except a burned-out one in Tünde's yard, and all the vehicles (with the exception of the helicopter) turn out to be moving at walking speed (such as the circus van). The act of walking and observing a social event in an urban context would immediately bring to mind the notion of the *flânerie*. Literally meaning, "to stroll" or "strolling", this French term came into close scrutiny when the poet Baudelaire developed the term into a concept in which the act of strolling became an instrument of experiencing the 19th century modern city, in his case, Paris. *Flânerie* is a specific mode of strolling, in which the *flâneur* exercises a spatial practice, observing the interior and/or exterior public spaces of a city or reading the population and its social texts.¹⁵ Furthermore, the term has connotations regarding a particular identity: it is discerned as "a native becoming a foreigner,"¹⁶ through beholding "the gaze of the alienated man."¹⁷ Through the writings of Walter Benjamin, the practice of *flânerie* came to be associated with modernity, an experience of the present moment as of the early 20th century context. *Flânerie* became a way of distancing one from his/herself and was associated with observing and witnessing, in other words, it is the way in which modern man/woman contemplates his/her environment and nature.

In this sense, we might designate Janos as an archetypical *flâneur*: Janos does the strolling throughout the film; Janos is always present, observing, witnessing and gazing upon the events; the spectator 'reads' the film through the experience of accompanying Janos. Walter Benjamin once commented that "the social foundation of *flânerie* is journalism", thus Janos' profession as a newspaperman comes to signify an important aspect.¹⁸ While the camera is travelling through the desolate spaces in the film, we are following Janos and are guided by his trajectory. Apart from the spectator's identification with Janos, there are other reasons as to why we can recognize him as a *flâneur*.

Janos is characterized as a stereotypical 'village idiot'. The reasons for this begin with the casting of Lars Rudolph in the role. The German actor had played similar roles earlier, in which he portrayed characters that are outsiders to the society, often because they are mentally disturbed.¹⁹ Tarr notes in an interview that meeting Rudolph was an inspiration for him to shoot the novel, he had finally found "his Janos."²⁰ Perhaps Tarr saw that Rudolph's uneasy appearance and his eccentric wide eyes would be very useful in translating some essential personal traits of Janos out of the book and into the film. In addition, Rudolph is particularly skilful in his manner of speech; that is, his calm and soft voice amplifies his character. Even though he is dubbed into Hungarian in *Werckmeister Harmonies*, we never seem to find his voice unnatural.

The other reason why the Janos character can be considered a village idiot is apparent in the reviews written upon the film's

reception. Written by different authors, Janos is described as a "holy idiot,"²¹ "wise fool"²² and "a Dostoyevskian holy fool."²³ This message is very implicit in the film, but the observations are in accord with the way in which the character in the novel is portrayed. Krasznahorkai introduces Janos as "terminally lunatic", and characterizes him as a drifting outcast.²⁴ A typical village idiot is also an outsider to the society and often embodies a certain social position, especially in literature. Because the village idiot is an outsider, he/she embodies a distanced but critical approach towards society, often questioning its moral foundation. Through the social positioning of the village idiot it is likely to propose that there is a significant parallel between Janos as the village idiot and Janos as the *flâneur*.

The important aspect of identifying Janos as a *flâneur* relies on his social position as opposed to his social class. When Baudelaire and Benjamin wrote about the *flâneur*, they employed the term to associate it with the bourgeoisie, a kind of social class that normally would not be associated with a character like Janos. Establishing Janos both as a village idiot and an outsider enables him to scrutinize the foundations of society, a task that Baudelaire and Benjamin attempted to emphasize throughout their writings. This aspect of Janos is evident during the scene where he wanders through the town square for the first time, walks past the groups of people and turns his head to investigate the facial expressions of the people. His curious gaze, however, is never returned. Janos is the only one looking. As a matter of fact, some people become very hostile to Janos later in the film. He simply becomes an alien to them, perhaps due to his persistent curiosity. In many ways, this situation entitles Janos to be a *flâneur*, namely the beholder with the alienated gaze.

However, I will suggest that there is another subject that could more aptly be identified as the *flâneur*. Walter Benjamin claimed, "The audience's identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera."²⁵ This is explained by the difference between a stage actor and a film actor: the engagement with the stage actor is direct, unfiltered, while the audience in film engages with the film actor through the camera. In a way the camera influences the way in which we see the actors, depending on angles, editing and movement. Following this suggestion, I propose that the spectator's identification and engagement with the narrative is not only through Janos, but also through the camera's unique state in its own right. The subject that strolls through the street, is omnipresent, and has an undisputed control over the narrative, is the camera. The camera acts like a *flâneur*: its continuous movement over space imitates that of strolling to an autonomous degree. The spectator is moved by the camera, not by Janos. Janos simply becomes an accompanying partner; a second witness in the diegesis while the camera guides the spectator through it. This situation is evident in the hospital scene, where the camera slowly enters the building and depicts the mob storming the hospital and attacking the patients, and after a while returns to Janos' gaze witnessing the horrible events. The scene is arranged in such a way that the sensation of walking inside the hospital and witnessing the events is evoked, and the spectators are returned to the narrative agent at the end. The scene is by no means a subjective, point of view shot of Janos, because he is spatially behind the walls in the scene, and his gaze is returned to the film's spectator at the end of the sequence.

The triangular relationship between the camera, the *flâneur* and the spectator functions as a dynamic positioning of film

spectatorship. In this sense, the spectator's engagement with the subject matter occurs through a kind of dual *flâneurs*, both the camera and Janos acting in accordance with each other. It is as if the camera moves when Janos stops, and vice versa, therefore enabling the spectator to follow the constant movement through the filmic space. In short, the contemplation experience of the film transpires through a narration that emphasizes both the narrated and the narrator. The spectator may identify himself/herself with Janos through empathy and thereby the film experience is transformed into the gaze of the outsider. We tend to follow Janos through the mob in the square, vicariously occupying his gaze and contemplating the world around us/him. On the other hand, it is also the camera that possesses some sort of autonomy in the narrative through its endless movements, ceaselessly surveying the landscape. The camera movements are central to Tarr's narration, but we can ascertain other aspects of filmmaking that may corroborate to the means of dynamic narration, such as framing and duration.

Through an obsessive use of framing and duration, Tarr efficiently transfigures the camera into an independent observer. His insistence on continuity "engages in a sort of magnification of the world" up to a point that it becomes an equivalent of looking, which "renders the miniature gigantic."²⁶ The recording of the camera is matched with the spectator's gaze, and at times runs parallel to Janos's gaze, attaining the triangular relationship suggested earlier. In the carefully choreographed scenes, there is an attention to the details of the surroundings. This becomes evident in some scenes where Tarr tends to frame the event through doorways and/or corridors, a stylization that is reminiscent of directors like Fassbinder. These self-consciously arranged objects function as obstacles to the nature of seeing and tempts the spectator into a more meticulous inspection of the filmic space. The voyeuristic vision attained through framing is reinforced through the camera movements occurring in strolling speed, as these movements are not invisible to us. We are fully aware of the camera movement: whether it is a tracking shot or steadicam. However, this awareness does not alienate us. On the contrary, movement is one of the ways in which we can engage with the image on screen as our focus between the camera and Janos changes respectively. The effect of the image on the spectator becomes purely and essentially contemplative when the camera assumes the position of a *flâneur*.

An example of the observing nature of Tarr's camera is apparent in two subsequent scenes. The first scene takes place in Tünde's flat, where Janos visits her to show his and Mr Eszter's support for her cause. We quickly realize that Janos has interrupted an awkward scene wherein a drunken military officer keeps Tünde occupied. Tarr conveys the scene through one shot where the camera is placed in the narrow corridor, in between two rooms, thus being able to frame both sides of the action. The space that Janos occupies is a well-lit kitchen while the army officer is ranting in the dim-lit bedroom. The conflict between the two is clear: the scene not only represents the clash between good and evil but also provides a situation where a private space has been breached. The army officer appears as an intruder and is separated from the space that Janos occupies. After Janos leaves, Tünde and the officer are shown through the doorway, which frames their image and space. The camera tracks backwards while both keep revolving around each other dancing to a symphonic military march. The music connects us to the next scene, where Janos visits the officer's children after accepting the favour Tünde has asked of

him. This scene is played in a similar manner, a doorway separates the spaces that the actors occupy, but the tracking movement is the opposite. The camera zooms in towards the children while they keep dancing feverishly against the same symphonic military march.

What these two scenes have in common is the gradual abstraction of narrative action into frivolous events while forcing the spectator to keep looking. First of all, the plot is suppressed through asserting an interest in insignificant events, events that at times we never get the idea of what is really going on or why it is shown to us. In both scenes, Janos is present for a limited time and interacts with the other characters in the film up until the point where he leaves the scene. Following his exit, the camera continues to capture the scene through a corridor and a doorway respectively. Such division of filmic space through framing mimics the shot as a look and the pictorial composition formally embodies the alienated gaze of the *flâneur*. As if literally affirming the dynamic relationship between the dual *flâneurs* and the spectator, Tarr reiterates this motif in diverse forms.

The Long Take and *Temps Mort*

The camera, at certain moments, lingers on spaces, objects or situations for an unusual amount of time. In the scene where Mr Eszter and Janos leave the house following their surrender to Tünde's requests, the camera focuses on their faces and tracks their movement while they keep walking. In the first few seconds the characters discuss the whale, but after a few lines of dialogue they become silent, while the camera keeps pacing the same distance, following their footsteps. The silence and the camera's tracking movement are maintained for an unexpected amount of time—about one minute. What takes place in this minute is not an event, nor anything that is substantially supporting the narrative, but is a moment of *temps mort*, literally, dead time. However, a conventional depiction of dead time would not allow for any subjects or characters within space. A rather traditional example of dead time would include, as in Antonioni's images, portrayals of empty space, architectural figures or shapes, where human existence can only be traced, rather than represented.

Tarr, however, manages numerous times to linger on human faces to impose a similar effect. The first scene ends with a close-up of the bartender; the kitchen scene ends with the hotel porter and his mistress kissing each other; the hospital scene ends with Janos's gaze; a repetition is made on the close-up of both Mr and Mrs Harrer's faces right outside Janos's home, and so on. Most of these scenes are, more or less, static images of human faces. On the other hand, the scene in which Mr Eszter and Janos walk is a scene with movement. What is unusual in this scene is not the extraordinarily long depiction of a seemingly irrelevant event, but rather the manner in which it is portrayed. This is where Tarr distinguishes himself from directors like Antonioni, who tend to portray dead time by a long or medium shot. In contrast, Tarr uses an extreme close-up; he fixes the two characters into the image and limits our perception of the spatial dynamics of the scene. Steven Marchant comments: "Held in close overlapping profile against a featureless background, the shot does not describe the passage of the pair from one place to another, but instead zeroes in on the movement of the various elements which internally compose the event: the shifting patterns given by the almost imperceptible position changes of their profiles set against the phased

repetition of the tread and scuff on the soundtrack."²⁷ There are several layers of stylistic devices at play here. Firstly, Tarr's camera mimics the walking trajectory of his characters, while assuming the position of the *flâneur*. Secondly, the depiction involves a subtle exchange of looks between the characters, in addition to the spectator's very similar involvement with the image, as we are fixed to images of facial expressions by an extreme close-up. Thirdly, speaking in terms of the scene's narrative significance, we see nothing of dramatic importance, which leads us to question the mere existence of this scene, as something has to be of importance. As the tracking shot persists, we realize that it is the soundtrack itself, a subtle mix of wind, footsteps and the rhythmic noise caused by Mr Eszter thumping his lunch box. We come to notice that a conventional 'track and walk' scene is substituted for a tracking shot completely based on the repetition of movement and rhythm, image and sound.

Tarr constructs the long take as an experiential event insofar as the persistent scrutiny of the camera enforces a contemplative spectatorship. Duration becomes palpable especially in sequences described above, in which Marchant comments that "the shot [...] does not evoke, describe, analyze or represent the event—the shot is the event."²⁸ The long take undermines our conventional expectations of narrative and substitutes itself for 'an open event' which compels us to question the passing of time, as well as offering a realisation of the numerous stylistic manipulations that are abound in cinema. This Deleuzian 'time-image' offers us an opportunity to appreciate the beauty of the image itself as well as the wholeness of the reality represented in this image. In this respect, I disagree with Marchant's argument in his otherwise excellent analysis, where he claims that there is no seer in *Werckmeister Harmonies*, because "it models the shot not as a look but as an event and with that implicitly rejects the redemptive possibilities contained within the neorealist inheritance."²⁹ I believe that *Werckmeister Harmonies* prompts its spectator to look at things in their wholeness through its self-conscious narration, which consists of several stylistic tropes that I have argued above. Perhaps "To look at what?" would be a more fitting question, but Marchant quite rightly provides a significant clue that the film tries to deal with metaphysical notions of the void and nothingness, themes that provide the basis of the film's pessimistic closure.

Much of the critical acclaim attributed to *Werckmeister Harmonies* relied on its rigorous and uncompromising use of the long take aesthetic. Tarr's insistence on highlighting the spatial surroundings of the narrative, drawing on the observing nature of the camera and an unwillingness to succumb to an ordinarily paced editing defied the contemporary norms of commercial cinema, paving the way for other idiosyncratic directors such as Pedro Costa, Lisandro Alonso and Carlos Reygadas to come forward. Following *Werckmeister Harmonies*, the long take became a model for austerity; a building block for films that belonged to the Slow Cinema cycle. There were, of course, other parameters that had a strong influence over this recent phenomenon, such as the shift from analogue to digital in production circumstances enabling the long take to become much more accessible. In many ways, Slow Cinema is a nostalgic rebirth of 1960s art cinema, its auteur-oriented background and the cinephilia that was closely associated with it. As well as a romantic reaction against the death of celluloid, globalization, industrial consumption and Hollywood dominance, Slow Cinema has brought forward new dynamics of highbrow cultural practice.

While the exhibition aspects of the films are exclusive to film festivals, their digital availability introduced them to an audience that was wider than ever imagined. The development of online communities made it easy for consumers to differentiate between highbrow and lowbrow films, triggering new forms of cinephilia. In other words, Slow Cinema is an anachronistic cycle. Even though it is very specific to the digital technologies available today, it evokes a strong sense of the past due to its relationship to modernist aesthetics and 1960s film culture.

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Passing Time

SOFIA COPPOLA'S *SOMEWHERE*

BY TOMAS HACHARD

"It's not the film stock or even the mustaches that give the game away, it's the variant manipulation of time, primarily its slowness, although of course this 'slowness' is only the pace of real time.... A parsing of the common enough phrase 'I don't like foreign movies' might be 'I don't want to sit in a cinema and feel time pass.'"

—Zadie Smith¹

Going to see the new film by your favourite director is like reuniting with an old friend: the most jarring changes can be evident at first sight. In *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), *Lost in Translation* (2003), and *Marie Antoinette* (2006), Sofia Coppola presented a consistent form of greeting: a short establishing shot of the female lead, in the first case standing on a peaceful suburban road on a warm summer day, in the second turned away from us while lying in bed, and in the third case eating cake while dressed in lavish eighteenth century clothing.

Her latest film, *Somewhere* (2010), begins in a bleak desert with an infinite horizon, a barren racetrack, and a black sports car. The car goes round and round and round until, after the fourth passing, it slows to a stop and the driver steps out. He stands, looking out past the camera, the car still humming as if out of breath. And from the very beginning, you can't help but wonder when the shot will end.

Coppola's films have always shared a certain predilection with the less hyperactive European style of filmmaking. Which is to say that Coppola's films have always focused more on mood than plot. They have all been more interested in how characters experience events in their lives than in what is being experienced. With every new movie, Coppola increasingly removed the spectacle from her films, dampened any thrilling tension in her characters' lives, and ultimately replaced plot points with character development, sensational dramatics with repetitive mundanities.

As she has solidified her thematic trenches and moved further away from more common Hollywood style, Coppola has also proven herself to be one of the American directors most interested in making the experience of time a central component of her films. Both *Lost in Translation* and *Marie Antoinette* feature sparse scripts that emphasize the empty spaces between events—the time spent in anticipation of action—more than they feature any dramatically important plot points. In both films, Coppola focuses on the entrenched boredom

faced by her characters, all of whom are plagued more by having an overabundance of time to kill than by actually needing to do or accomplish anything.

It is only in *Somewhere*, though, that Coppola matches the form of her filmmaking with the content of her writing. It is only in *Somewhere* that Coppola's presentation of the passing of time cinematographically matches up with how her characters experience it in the script: as relentless, mundane, and sometimes overbearing, but also, most commonly, as completely lacking in variation. Coppola's characters at times experience the numbness of total boredom or the exhilaration of a flight of excitement, but for the most part they meander through life in a state somewhere between awe and restlessness.

Our driver in *Somewhere* is Jonny Marco/Stephen Dorff, a Hollywood star who has worked with the likes of Al Pacino, Meryl Streep, and Sharon Stone. Jonny is currently doing the odd press junket for his most recent movie and starting prep work for his next major film. He's between jobs, and so has plenty of time to spend at the infamous celebrity party spot that he calls home: the Chateau Marmont. Paradise, right?

Not exactly. The first 24 hours that we witness of Jonny's life go as follows: first, we watch twin blondes give him a bedtime pole dance in his hotel room, during which he falls asleep. The next day, we see him splashing water on his face in the wash-room, then having his morning cigarette, then partaking in a morning beer (lunchtime, if we're charitable and assume a sleep-in). After that comes an afternoon drive, during which Jonny follows a blonde to her mansion after she innocently smiles at him from the next lane. Back at the Chateau, an evening beer, after which we return to the twin blondes, this time dressed up in tennis gear, giving another private and not particularly arousing bedtime dance.

Coppola has always been interested in the boredom of affluence. Wealth and success, her films consistently tell us, leave you with time as your last remaining enemy. When the bills are paid and the world is your oyster, the only thing left to worry about is how to spend your money and fill your days; the monotony of a life of leisure begins to set in. *Somewhere* is no different than *Lost in Translation* or *Marie Antoinette* in this respect. Most events in the film carry little more significance beyond how they help or force Jonny to pass the time, which is pretty much the only thing he has to put effort into doing anymore.

The seeds of *Somewhere* can thus be easily traced to *Lost in Translation* through this thematic resemblance, but they are equally there in *Virgin Suicides*. The latter is admittedly leagues

away from *Somewhere* in the fact that a major plot point drives the whole film. In the opening voice-over monologue we learn that our protagonists, the five Lisbon sisters, are destined to commit suicide, and so the rest of the movie works in anticipation of how and why that will occur.

What *Virgin Suicides* shows in the process, though, is a completely unorthodox coming-of-age story. Coppola conforms to the standard components of the genre: the awkward adolescent parties and dances, the secretive sexual exploits, the experiments with drugs, and the misunderstanding parents. Yet at most turns, Coppola also puts a focus on the uneasy details that undo the clean and orderly presentation of life given by most genre films. After we watch one of the Lisbon sisters, Lux/Kirsten Dunst, sleep with the handsome and popular Trip Fontaine/Josh Hartnett—who leaves her without warning in the middle of the night—Coppola cuts to an interview with an older Trip. “Most people will never taste that kind of love,” he tells us, while offering no explanation as to why he disappeared that night. “At least I tasted it once, right?” Coppola holds the interview shot a few seconds longer than necessary, just long enough to show a nurse walk into the scene. The nurse informs Trip of his upcoming group meeting, and we realize that he is in a rehab clinic.

What Coppola does to the coming-of-age story in *Virgin Suicides* is similar to what she does with the historical drama in *Marie Antoinette*: she keeps the basic form while amplifying the messy details that both genres conventionally ignore when done purely. In both cases she does so by slowing down the pace of the film, delving a bit deeper into the characters, and including scenes that perhaps don’t advance the plot but do unravel the neat picture of life that we would get otherwise. Through the way it plays with genre, *Virgin Suicides* fits with the reflective approach that becomes more emphatic in Coppola’s later films; its more standard plot belies Coppola’s subversive intentions.

Beginning with *Lost in Translation*, Coppola’s films move toward a form of storytelling more directly suitable to her overall goals as a filmmaker. If Coppola’s point in *Virgin Suicides* was that the innocence we lose in adolescence does not necessarily lead to nostalgic middle-class lives, starting with *Lost in Translation* she begins to pick at the illusions of luxurious upper-class life. The new types of characters she explores in *Lost in Translation* and *Marie Antoinette*—ones who live in affluence rather than adolescence—beget new messy details. A stifling ennui comes to the forefront, and the presence of dramatic plot points recedes in turn. In both *Lost in Translation* and *Marie Antoinette*, Coppola breaks with her earlier storytelling style by cutting the plot lines to a bare minimum.

In *Lost in Translation*, Bob/Bill Murray and Charlotte/Scarlett Johansson are stuck in their ritzy hotel, separated from the wider Japanese culture and forced to drink at the bar while listening to low-grade



Marie Antoinette

karaoke performed by perky Hollywood actresses. In *Marie Antoinette*, the infamous queen of France (Kirsten Dunst) is also secluded from the outside world, only in her case much more willingly and at Versailles. There is no drama in any of their lives and so no drama in the events of the films: Bob and Charlotte spend much of the film swimming, eating, watching TV, and procrastinating over decisions about home renovations; Marie Antoinette's life is filled mostly by shopping and gossip. Although all three escape their confines at one point in search of momentary excitement, Coppola's emphasis remains on the monotony of their day-to-day lives.

The story in *Somewhere* offers no significant changes in this respect; there is still a celebrity at its heart and the plot still revolves around Jonny's day-to-day experiences, just like it did for Bob, Charlotte, and Marie Antoinette. Still, the transition that *Somewhere* represents for Coppola's work as a whole is not completely dissimilar to what occurred between *Virgin Suicides* and *Lost in Translation*. It's another step, a forceful one, toward a sparser, subdued, and more delving style of filmmaking.

What Coppola adjusts in *Somewhere* is the presentation of Jonny's meandering existence. Coppola fills *Somewhere* with minute, mostly insignificant happenings, as she does with *Lost in Translation* and *Marie Antoinette*. In *Somewhere*, though, these events are played out in their entirety so that, when time passes for Jonny, time passes for the audience at the same pace and with the same level of excitement. We watch every second of the two pole-dances that bookend the first twenty-four hours we spend with Jonny. Same goes for his daughter Cleo's (Elle Fanning) figure-skating routine, the games of Guitar Hero the two play, and the hopelessly amateur cover of "Teddy Bear" they are regaled with toward the end of the film.

This is a sharp change from *Lost in Translation* and *Marie Antoinette*, both of which used precise editing to show the passing of time. When we see Charlotte alone in her hotel room in *Lost in Translation*, Coppola films her putting on lipstick, cuts to a shot of her lying in bed, and then to one of her putting up decorations. The stream of events demonstrates Charlotte's

boredom, but the time still passes between the shots. In *Somewhere*, Coppola lets the action play out in every scene before she cuts away. Rather than cutting through time, she lets the time span of events occur naturally.

Film has always been unique for the ease in which it can create and adjust its rhythm and pacing. In the late 1920s, Paul Rotha observed how Russian directors were able to create appropriate rhythms for different situations by cutting between different perspectives, angles, and distances.² This allowed them to procure audience reactions that befitted the specific event on screen: anxiety during a car chase, sighs during a romantic encounter. Decades later, Margaret Kennedy similarly noted how, by "making things happen more quickly or slowly," movies capture "that rhythm in our lives which defies both reason and the clock."³ Films capture our imaginations, she argued, precisely because they can mirror a human experience of time rather than a detached, scientific one.

But while film has proven extremely proficient at mimicking the heart-stopping and the heart-pounding in our lives, it has often eschewed the more common middle ground, those moments when the heart beats to the numbing rhythm of standard time. The heart-stopping comes naturally with the graceful movement of the camera, the heart-pounding with quick, well-planned editing. The middle ground comes more naturally to the theatre, where a change of pace in the audience's experience can only be achieved over time, through individual performances and the exchange of dialogue, and where the physical presence of the actors makes it harder to immediately create extraordinary sensations. Because film can, as Hitchcock famously proclaimed, cut out the boring parts, it is more capable of sensationalizing, of creating a feeling of wonder, a unique ability that directors do not often miss the opportunity to use.

The major change that occurs in *Somewhere*, then, comes from Coppola's decision to explicitly counteract the natural tendencies of film in order to better transmit the experience of time that was already present in her earlier films. This is already

Somewhere



somewhat presaged in *Marie Antoinette*. There, Coppola portrays the menial nature of Marie Antoinette's life by showing montage after montage of her repetitive everyday activities. This remains close in style to *Lost in Translation*; editing remains fundamental to portraying the particular experience of time. Coppola's use of montage in *Marie Antoinette*, though, is ingenious because it inverts its normal effect. Rather than circumventing the passing of time, or making the mundane exciting, the montages in *Marie Antoinette* so overwhelm us with the tiresome activities that fill up Marie Antoinette's life that they accentuate just how much time she has on her hands.

Marie Antoinette, unlike *Lost in Translation*, features the first slight adjustments to the form of Coppola's filmmaking. In *Marie Antoinette*, Coppola's means are subversive. She inverts the normal use of montage, just as she turned the coming-of-age story on its head in *Virgin Suicides*. But then, just like *Lost in Translation* traded in Coppola's subversive relation to genre for a more mood and character-driven storytelling style, *Somewhere* proceeds to directly eliminate, rather than try to work with, the unique properties of film that threaten to obstruct the experience of time central to Coppola's films.

In this film, Coppola dramatically reduces her use of editing. During the various dances from the first half hour of the film, two shots are used: one of Jonny watching and the other of Jonny's POV. Coppola equally cuts down on camera motion, and when camera movement is prominent, the dramatic nature of the motion is offset by immobility of the subject. Both of these changes are explicit in the scene where Jonny gets a mould of his head made for special effects. His head is covered in white plaster-like material. When he is left alone to let the plaster set, the camera slowly closes in on him sitting upright and still. All we hear is his breathing, the circularity of which, just as with the car in the first shot of the film, leaves no obvious place—no piece of dialogue or motion—at which to end the shot, no cue for Coppola to cut away. The shot lasts for a good period of time, a minute and 28 seconds to be exact, but it gathers its powerful effect from the indeterminacy of its potential length.

What we get in *Somewhere*, then, is the most complete fulfillment of Coppola's project yet. The sparse storytelling style that she developed over her first three films is supplemented by a leap in the form of her filmmaking. In *Somewhere*, Coppola presents time as her characters experience it. By himself, Jonny's days are filled with alcohol, sex, TV history documentaries, and more sex. With Cleo, he expands to playing Wii tennis, Guitar Hero, card games, tanning, and swimming. On their own and in moderate sums these are all unremarkable activities. As the summation of your days, weeks, and months, they begin to weigh you down with their drabness. The audience's experience begins more like the former: the pole dances and figure-skating routine are not particularly special; we assume they are featured so prominently for a reason, that they lead to something more. Only as the film goes on, as we realize that there is, in fact, nothing more to Jonny's life, does the vacuity of Jonny's life become evident. This slow-burning aspect of the film—which is achieved through the unique, if simple way that it portrays the passing of time—represents a remarkable formal achievement for Coppola. And while on the one hand it seems to mark the end of a story for Coppola—the achievement of a long-sought-after goal—it equally proves that, contrary to claims that her films are repetitive, she is a filmmaker who it will always be a pleasure to reunite with, precisely because she is always retooling and perfecting her form of self-expression.

Tomas Hachard regularly writes DVD reviews for *Pop Matters* and has also been published in *The Millions* and *Toronto Standard*. You can find more of his writing on his blog, "Collected Musings", or by following him on Twitter.

Notes

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Somewhere



Unlikely Heroines?

'WOMEN OF A CERTAIN AGE' AND ROMANTIC COMEDY

BY DEBORAH JERMYN

Since the "screwballs" of the classical era, romantic comedy or "romcom", in one form or another, has remained one of the most durable of Hollywood's genres. In 1934, Frank Capra's crowd-pleasing *It Happened One Night* famously became the first film to bag the "big five" (Best Picture, Best Director, Best Writing, Best Actress, Best Actor) at the Academy Awards, a feat which underlines how historically at least the genre managed to secure both critical and popular esteem. Yet the critical weight afforded to romcom in more recent times has often seemed to be inversely proportionate to its box-office pull, since the romcom has increasingly come to suffer from a reputation for trite, sentimental and conservative storytelling. In her absorbing account of postfeminist culture, for example, scholar Diane Negra argues that, "The romantic comedy that has flourished since the 1990s has shown itself to be extraordinarily adept in pigeonholing the perceived truths of women's experiences... [speaking] from and to a neoconservative cultural context."¹ It is not just in academic circles that the romcom has often fared badly. Writing on film.com, Laremy Legel has gone as far as to suggest that, "Critics HATE romantic comedies." In an interesting albeit brief survey, Legel examines two sets of figures relating to a series of successful romcoms drawn from 2003-2008 (including such titles as *50 First Dates* (2004) and *The Break-Up* (2006)), comparing their box-office receipts with the ratings they received on film critic website rottentomatoes.com. He notes that in contrast to their evident popular success (the two titles above made \$239m between them), the films average a critics' score of just 46%, with only six romcoms in this period meriting the favourable rottentomatoes rank of "certified fresh" (ie rating 75% or more among 40 critics).² Legel concludes, "A critically loved 'true' romantic comedy that scores at the box office is becoming non-existent."

However, there has long been a co-existent school of thought in scholarly writing which argues that the romcom's maligned reputation doesn't tell the whole story. This suggests instead that with its focus on romantic bargaining, the sexual economy and shifting cultural standards, the genre is ideally placed to reflect on and critique the nature of changing values and relationships, and continues "to negotiate and respond dynamically to the issues and preoccupations of its time."³ From this perspective, the narrative concerns of the genre can enable it to hold an instructive light up to the prejudices, fears and assumptions that too often inform our emotional and

romantic entanglements. In this essay, it is this more liberal interpretation of romcom that I take further. Specifically, I want to explore how the socially critical, even subversive, potential of romcom can be seen at work in a particular body of films or "sub-genre" that has gained momentum in recent years; classical style films in which the romance centres on the desires of and for an "older" woman.⁴ The absence of "women of a certain age" from cinema screens has long been one of the most grievous criticisms levied against the industry, a key instance of how, unlike their male counterparts, older women in our cultural landscape are systematically rendered invisible, spent, obsolete, as they age. For Margaret Tally, the lack of good film roles for women in mainstream cinema as a whole can be attributed to the fact that, "Men still predominantly hold positions of power in Hollywood"—with "younger men [occupying] more decision making positions...than ever before"—executives who are driven by the belief that (other) young men are the most important audience to pursue.⁵ As Tally's comments underscore, for many years, Hollywood in particular has been charged with being "youth-obsessed", chasing younger audiences by putting their likeness on-screen and, barring a handful of tired stereotypes such as the "interfering mother", virtually removing an entire demographic group from representation in the process. Yet increasingly, the romcom has provided older women actors with star billing at exactly the point in their career when one might expect them to slip down the credits into supporting roles or to disappear from our screens altogether.

"It's never too late to fall in love"⁶

Older women would seem to be unlikely romcom protagonists, given also the genre's thematic preoccupation with finding a mate and settling down. Typically, from midlife if not before, by virtue of their age they are excluded and erased from our everyday sexual economy, which overwhelmingly privileges the lithe bodies and unlined faces of young women and girls. However, in recent years there have been a number of romcoms centred on older women protagonists, a steady trickle of films which includes titles like *Something's Gotta Give* (2003) with Diane Keaton; *Must Love Dogs* (2005) with Diane Lane; *I Could Never Be Your Woman* (2007) with Michelle Pfeiffer and even musical-hybrid *Mama Mia!* (2008), with Meryl Streep. In part, these films underline how inescapably subjective the term "older" is; while Keaton was 56 when *Something's Gotta Give* was made,



and Pfeiffer was 49 in *I Could Never Be Your Woman*, Diane Lane was only 40 in *Must Love Dogs*. As Susan Sontag notes in "The Double Standard of Aging", "[A] woman of 'a certain age', as the French say discreetly... might be anywhere from her early twenties to her late fifties."⁷ None of the films noted in this essay feature women beyond their early 60s, demonstrating that there are boundaries even here regarding just how old these "older" women are allowed to be. Nevertheless, together these films have demonstrated that, far from being only highly conservative, romantic comedy may actually afford older women stars possibilities overwhelmingly denied to them by the bulk of the Hollywood mainstream. I want to argue, then, that this most disparaged and allegedly conventional of genres actually provides one of the few spaces in popular culture where older women audiences might encounter a multi-dimensional, appealing representation of themselves. For where else do they get to be witty, smart and interesting, even if a little discontent? To be the sassy one, the lover, the woman with the clever lines, the one the spectator might want to be - and not just someone's mum?

Using textual analysis of the films and examining their reception in North America and the UK, this essay focuses on two recent examples of this romcom movement: *Last Chance Harvey* (Joel Hopkins, 2008) starring (49 year-old) Emma Thompson alongside Dustin Hoffman; and *It's Complicated* (Nancy Meyers, 2009), starring (60 year-old) Meryl Streep alongside Steve Martin and Alec Baldwin. In the former, lonesome but spirited airport market-researcher Kate (Thompson) meets divorced, stressed-out jingle writer Harvey (Hoffman) after he travels from New York to London for his estranged daughter Susan's wedding - only for him to decide to return home for a meeting before the evening reception, prompting her admission that she wants her stepfather to give her away. Harvey misses his plane and loses his job, before unexpectedly bumping into Kate again at the airport and, gaining her permission to walk her across town to her writing class, the two fall in love over a meandering evening, winning Harvey a "last chance" at a renewed life. In *It's Complicated*, successful Santa Barbara bakery owner Jane (Streep) becomes mistress to her ex-husband Jake (Baldwin) despite his having remarried a much younger woman, after they drunkenly reunite at their son's graduation. Their affair is complicated further still when she simultaneously finds herself embarking on a relationship with Adam (Martin), the smitten architect overseeing the much longed-for remodeling of her kitchen. Together these films allow a consideration of differently accented takes on the older romantic heroine theme, made by different branches of the industry; while low-budget *Harvey* was just the second feature for Hopkins and received a limited release, *It's Complicated* was directed by seasoned Hollywood (and romcom) stalwart Nancy Meyers, and trailed by much publicity as Streep rode the wave of a massive box-office revival following *Mama Mia!* Figures at boxofficemojo.com show that *Harvey* thus achieved a respectable though modest gross worldwide total lifetime box-office of just over \$32.5m, while *It's Complicated* scored a phenomenal \$219m. Though it has two Oscar winning stars at its fore, *Harvey* still looks and feels like the modestly budgeted production it is, much of it shot on location around an appealingly autumnal London, with a tenor that is frequently rather darker and bleaker than romcom is usually thought to allow. In comparison, *It's Complicated* has not merely a stellar cast playing out plenty of farcical comedy, but all of the gloss, wealth and lavish mise-en-

scene one has come to expect of Meyers' work. What, then, might these two films tell us about the (lack of) critical weight typically afforded to romantic comedy; and its potential, nevertheless, to constitute incisive, affective or provocative filmmaking?

Last Chance Harvey:

"Too lightweight to be annoying... too formulaic to be memorable.... too safe to be in any way meaningful?"⁸

Notwithstanding the quote drawn on above, the reception of *Last Chance Harvey* at first glance seems to have been generally positive; while some reviewers like Alistair Harkness in *The Scotsman* were blankly condemnatory (a "corny and contrived weepy" with "lazy plot mechanics and cornball dialogue", he concluded⁹) many others were charmed ("very sweet... observant and beautifully performed" wrote Anna Smith, for example, at *Empire*).¹⁰ But when one looks closely at many of the more positive reviews, one finds in fact that they are often littered with caveats and misgivings, expressing mixed sentiments in which very often it is the stars—not the film itself, its direction, or its interpretation of romcom—which are singled out for praise (indeed both Thompson and Hoffman received Golden Globe nominations for their performances). Warren Clements' Toronto *Globe and Mail* review captures this tension perfectly when he opens by declaring the film to be "a tug of war between a formulaic script and the ever-watchable Dustin Hoffman and Emma Thompson."¹¹ Leads of their calibre are widely positioned as something of a novelty for the genre, bestowing an element of gravitas on the sentimental wasteland of romantic comedy. An exemplary instance of this is found in Wendy Ide's review in *The Times*, where she writes:

Emma Thompson and Dustin Hoffman are probably not the first names that come to mind as the leads in a romantic comedy. It's a genre more usually associated with pretty, empty stars with honed abdominals but flabby acting skills... [But] this film is a reminder that two actors at the absolute top of their game can weave magic even in a slightly predictable example of a wholly formulaic genre... in the hands of these two pros, even the hoariest of narrative chestnuts are somehow reinvigorated. (Emphasis added).¹²

Thus even reviews which were generally favorable towards the film seemed to feel duty bound to knock the genre from which it emanated. They frequently noted the "predictable" storyline, stale direction or "timeworn" screenplay. Where they liked the film, this was often presented as something of a surprising or embarrassing admission; as Manohla Dargis put it in *The New York Times*, despite the film being "contrived, snuffle- and sometimes gag-inducing" she was "*seduced by its two wily leads*" (emphasis added), a turn of phrase which both draws on the romantic vernacular of the genre and positions her as guardedly, reticently, flirting with it. Further underscoring this sense of resistance, she finally confesses, "*I reluctantly gave in to this imperfect movie, despite the cornball dialogue [and] pedestrian filmmaking*" (emphasis added).¹³

Such responses reveal much about the enduringly low critical esteem held by romantic comedy and the *de facto* opposition it must overcome before being credited with being "worth talking about." And yet, a more reflective, nuanced analysis of



Last Chance Harvey uncovers substance that makes for thoughtful and often disquieting viewing. While critics bemoaned the film's adherence to generic convention—as if this in itself were somehow a misdemeanor—*Last Chance Harvey* is very clearly a film which knows, plays with and enjoys its generic traditions, rather than only unimaginatively rolling them out. It retreads the footsteps of its filmic pedigree in its affectionate and picturesque use of London's South Bank for much of the couple's courtship (familiar to romcom fans from *Truly, Madly, Deeply* [1990] and *Four Weddings and a Funeral* [1994]), while Harvey's failure to meet Kate as planned when he is unexpectedly hospitalised loudly echoes *An Affair To Remember* (1957). It is telling also that of all the jobs Harvey might have had, he is a jingle writer; in other words, a purveyor of hackneyed generic music designed to elicit audience emotions within a tightly constrained timeframe, and in this respect driven by much the same needs as the average film score. In making Harvey not just a jingle writer ("Did you always want to write jingles, or was there something more?" Kate asks him bluntly to his amusement), but one who seems embarrassed by it and who longs instead to be a jazz pianist, Hopkins gives more than a nod to the particularly heightened contrivance of music in the romcom genre.

A number of reviews singled out the film's "dressing up montage" for special disdain. Such "makeover" sequences have become one of the core conventions (and pleasures) of post-classical cinema's chick flicks and romcoms, scenes engineered to showcase the heroine trying on a plethora of outfits and/or being groomed and repackaged, before being shown finally in the climactic moment of "the reveal." Kate's dressing up montage, rather oddly and irately described by Roger Ebert as "gratuitous and offensive",¹⁴ comes after she and Harvey have again

met at the airport, this time in a bar. Recognising her as the interviewer he had rebuffed the day before, he clumsily apologises and after an inauspicious start the two begin a bantering walk around London in which she prises the story of his estrangement from his daughter from him. Realising the wedding reception is still underway she tells him, "You have to go... Harvey, she's your daughter and you're her father, you *have* to go" and he agrees on condition that she accompany him. An evening reception, however, requires an evening dress, and thus the two undertake to find her something to wear.

So far, so generically familiar. But it seems somewhat misplaced to critique a film for adopting the generic conventions that, after all, allow it to define itself within that genre. Ebert refers to the montage scene as an "exhausted cliché", but would he bemoan the final shootout featured in a Western, one wonders? Instead, it is perhaps more appropriate to look at the flair or skill with which conventions are used, appropriated or re-imagined.¹⁵ Again, *Harvey* playfully reprises this motif when it eschews a glamorous backdrop and instead enacts Kate's "dressing-up" montage (appropriately enough) in a costume store. Playing it for laughs, she tries on one more ridiculous outfit after another, but the film still delivers the pay-off of "the reveal"; not the Spanish flamenco costume, but an understated, wonderfully elegant Little Black Dress. As convention dictates, this is a moment where the audience, alongside Harvey who stands and applauds her final choice, is positioned to take pleasure in Kate's transformation. And yet, unlike standard "reveals" there is no lingering and loving close-up on either a radiant Kate or a transfixed Harvey, as instead the pair rush off to the party; and though her hair is now worn loose it's still a little unkempt; there's no newly applied glow since she hasn't done

much to her make-up; she still stands rather awkwardly next to Harvey since she towers over him; and she has the curves of an older, fuller figure rather than the svelte form favoured by Hollywood. As Thompson herself said in her blog about the film, "[Y]ou'll notice I am decidedly unglamorous and at least size 16. I really wanted to look like a "normal" woman, I mean in terms of body size."¹⁶ This, then, is an unlikely heroine, and a makeover which both fulfils and confounds generic convention.

It is in the role of Kate, and the choice of Emma Thompson to play her, that one finds the most intriguing and richly drawn of the film's characters, and its most earnest challenge to the notion that romcoms are inherently trivial. Unusually for the classically styled romcom of recent years, given how, as Roberta Garrett observes,¹⁷ they have increasingly been presumed to focus on women's interests, female characters and women audiences, the film's title very much positions this story as *Harvey's*; the path that unfolds as the two meet is positioned as his "last chance" for contentment, and in this sense the film seems very deliberately to challenge the idea that it is predominantly a female subjectivity that is at stake in these films. But Kate is every bit as integral as Harvey to the narrative and it is in the crafting of this contradictory, "decidedly unglamorous", forty-something romantic heroine that the film gives a lie to the argument that romantic comedy can only be "lightweight", "formulaic" and "safe", to paraphrase Harkness again.

A number of reviewers described how they struggled to suspend their disbelief when faced with the proposition that a woman like Kate/Thompson—funny, articulate and attractive well into her 40s—could be single. "Thompson exudes such warmth and humor and basic human vitality that it's hard to buy this Miss Lonely Hearts act" mused Dargis¹⁸; for Tim Robey writing in *The Telegraph* she was "inexplicably single."¹⁹ While flattering to Thompson, this response is simultaneously damning of mature single women, since it suggests that to be a single woman in your 40s, there must be something "wrong" with you. Thompson's (natural) radiance and vitality, her energetic performance, coupled with Kate's self-deprecating wit and intelligence make for an apparently unlikely singleton it would seem. In implying that it is odd that a woman "like Kate" could be single, these reviewers unwittingly illustrate Negra's contention that single women have been rendered increasingly aberrant and abject in postfeminist culture²⁰. Negra argues that the contemporary chick flick "identifies the spectre of singlehood as a fate to be avoided at all cost."²¹ But of course, the traditional romcom has always been predicated on the eventual union (though not necessarily the marriage) of the would-be couple, as the desired resolution that will enhance the lives of *both* parties; the fulfilment of this convention, achieved after overcoming a series of obstacles, drives the drama and is the essence of it. It is not Kate's wish for a romantic partner that is insidious here, but rather the reviewers' implication that only women somehow "lacking" would not already have acquired one by middle-age.

The depiction of Kate's single life could at one level be read, as Negra might interpret it, as seeking to elicit our pity or fear; her shift-work interviewing travellers as they disembark at the airport is a dreary occupation and, as Harvey's response to her when they first meet underlines, involves her being rebuffed on a daily basis—when he apologises for his rudeness she replies, "You probably were. Most people are." As an apparently only child she has the crushing responsibility of being sole carer for an overbearing mother who phones her relentlessly to probe

her whereabouts. But rather than seeing Kate in this light as an "abject" figure, I want instead to draw on Alex Hobbs' work examining troubled masculinity and the "mature" romcom, in which she notes that it is *women* in these films who are positioned as being the more confident and accomplished of the sexes in later life.²² We see also, then, how Kate is cherished by her colleagues, whom she kisses on arrival at work and who clearly want to protect her from hurt when Harvey fails to meet her the day after the wedding. By comparison, all of Harvey's relationships—with his boss, his daughter, his ex-wife—seem fraught, marking him (and not Kate) as the one most "lacking." We also see how Kate embraces creativity, attending writing classes and telling Harvey of her dream to pen a book ("A really good holiday read...I think I've got one of those inside me" she says, situating this as an ongoing desire). In contrast, Harvey has apparently long since conceded his ambition to be a jazz pianist; it is Kate who must tell him, that even now, "You could."

None of this is to say, however, that the film depicts Kate as content with her lot and it is her often conflictual impulses that make her so much more than the kind of one-dimensional heroine detractors of the genre typically sketch; a woman who wants but fears love and who has come to anticipate and even welcome disappointment ("I expected you not to show, in fact I think I actually almost *wanted* you not to show, because it just sort of easier that way" she tells Harvey after he fails to make their appointment). Though she can be wonderfully warm, she also shows the capacity for a sharp tongue, cruelly jibing her mother about her father's abandonment of them in one early exchange, and witheringly telling Harvey, "That'll help" as he attempts to drown his sorrows in the airport bar. In a film which is not afraid to downplay the "com" aspect of "romcom", one of the most moving, awkward and quietly observed scenes in the film is hers, when she agrees to go on a blind date organised by work friend Oonagh. The subtle drama that ensues is of little magnitude in the scheme of things, yet is anything but "lightweight." When Oonagh and her husband leave shortly after making the introduction, Kate is discomfited to find herself alone with her date, who then runs into a group of younger friends at the bar. They all end up sitting together and Kate finds herself slowly though not consciously squeezed out of the conversation. Excusing herself, she visits the bathroom where she fights back tears in a private moment. Watching her alone there willing herself not to cry, one senses that these tears are only in part about the social humiliation of that evening. Rather, they are for the compounded disappointment that the night represents; for all the lost hopes, all the dates that, like this one, have never culminated in her meeting "the one." Such are the kinds of emotions and small, painful moments that the desire for love entails and that women actors of "a certain age" are rarely given the opportunity to perform; and that the older woman's romcom, at its best, can capture exquisitely.

As one would expect of the genre, however, by the film's end Kate's sense of the future is considerably brighter and Harvey looks to be the elusive "one." His zest for life too is renewed and following in the tradition of what Garrett calls the romcom's "generic learning process",²³ when he turns down the offer of getting his old job back, we understand it is Kate whose "instruction" has given him the courage and optimism to do so. It is only now, we imagine, that he will be able to pursue or fulfil his ambition to be a jazz pianist. It is also Kate who enables Harvey to reconcile with his daughter Susan; recognising this, Susan explicitly thanks Kate as she leaves the reception.

The film therefore shows Kate to have “educated” Harvey in the ways of the personal, emotional world. At one level, this is problematic for a feminist reading since it still places the woman protagonist in an essentially nurturing role, charged with making this damaged man into a better person. Alternatively, Dustin Hoffman argues in the DVD commentary that there is a *parity* between the emotional journey undertaken by the couple; as he observes, “Both of these characters somehow provide a catharsis for the other... each [is altered] for the better because of the other person...without me, Harvey, coming into her life she would have remained stuck probably and not had the insight that she has in the last scene, that on a deep level she has set up her own rejections.” But at another level, Kate’s more overt emotional tutelage of Harvey merely underlines Hobbs’ sense that women in these films are the more independent and balanced of the sexes in later life, defying the ubiquitous and damning representations of misfit ‘spinsters’ that predominate elsewhere in popular culture. There is a final indication too that Harvey recognises the need to adapt most to accommodate this new relationship, since when Kate begins to ask him the interview questions he refused to answer at the airport, his reply to the question of his “place of residence” is a promising, “I’m in transition.”

Nancy Meyers and *It's Complicated*:

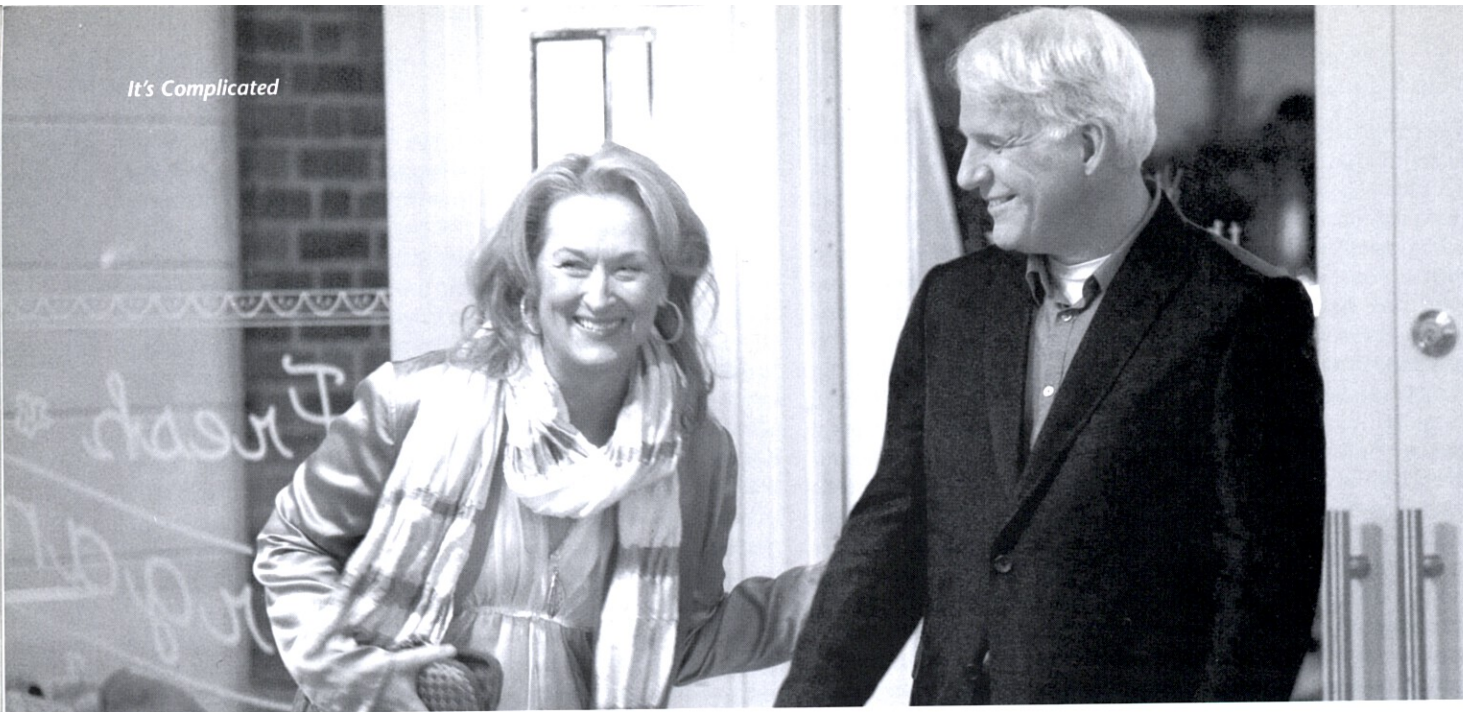
A perfect storm of “formula and predictability”?

Despite winning mammoth box office, *It's Complicated* achieved only a fairly pedestrian 57% critics’ average on *rottentomatoes.com*, again seeming to prove the contention that the critical weight afforded to films in the genre is often

inversely proportionate to its ticket sales. Broadly similar critical patterns to *Harvey* emerge again also, with most praise being meted out to the performances (of Streep and Baldwin and their “terrific chemistry”²⁴ in particular) and recurrent misgivings being voiced about the inevitable predictability of the proceedings. Here, though, the “predictability” is attributed not just to the genre, but to Nancy Meyers’ authorship. Since Meyers previously directed the similarly themed hit *Something’s Gotta Give* in 2003, Anna Smith even designates her a kind of new subgenre auteur, when she notes this is Meyers’ second “*geronto-com*”²⁵ (emphasis added). Yet despite being “the most successful woman filmmaker since Mary Pickford”²⁶, Meyers has received scant critical or scholarly attention, instead being dismissed as someone whose “populist appeal”²⁷ is undeserving of close analysis, who “In short, [makes] crowd-pleasers...She’s a clever contriver, adept at adding a patina of apparent relevance, even a veneer of feminism, to situations that are otherwise bogus and artificial.”²⁸ Thus reviews of the film were peppered with barbs directed not just at its genre *per se* but at its director, who is frequently situated as a purveyor of highly manufactured (if also highly successful), overly opulent, female-focussed Hollywood flannel. As Nicholas Barber put it in *The Independent*, “the film [is] soft, warm, doughy comfort food” with an “air of complacency [made] even sleepier by the wealth and privilege which slosh around the characters, a regular annoyance in Meyers’ films.”²⁹ For Kirk Honeycutt in *The Hollywood Reporter*, Meyers’ success is a default one, attributable to the fact that she makes films for an audience that “no one else” does, an overlooked “niche” with expendable income, namely “middle-aged

It's Complicated





moviegoers, especially women." What "[she] doesn't do is take chances. She sticks to formula and predictability."³⁰

However, there is another, richer strand of thought emergent in the limited critical appraisal of Meyers, intermittently evident across the reception of *It's Complicated*. Rather than seeing her mining of romcom formulae as only tired and unimaginative, this line of thought instead understands her filmmaking as a contemporary revisiting of classical Hollywood traditions of romcom—the screwball and comedy of remarriage, with the twist here being that the protagonists are now old enough to be the parents of their forerunners—in which Meyers “proves herself the true descendant of George Cukor and Preston Sturges.”³¹ For Daryll Wiggers also, it is this knowing nostalgia, this affection for the relationship comedies of Hawks, Lubitsch and Wilder that Meyers grew up watching, that is “the secret of her success.”³² There is no doubt that the excessively sumptuous mise-en-scène and moneyed milieu that Meyers focuses on have become (problematic) markers of her authorship, taken as a visible sign of their “lightweight” nature and limiting much of her oeuvre to a rarefied social stratum. Looked at in this other light though, as paying a kind of homage to an era of filmmaking and period of romantic comedy in which the recurring glitter and affluence of its protagonists was recognised as a constituent part of its pleasurable and slightly fantastical quality, Meyers’ eye for opulence need not necessarily, or only, be seen as “an annoyance.” Would the critics who disparage Meyers’ favoured milieu take the same critical yardstick to *Bringing up Baby* (1938) or *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), for example? Furthermore, there is no sense in which the privilege and wealth enjoyed by so many of the protagonists in this earlier chapter of romcom have been taken by critics to preclude the films’ ability to make any critical commentary on the era’s values or gender roles.

Of course, Honeycutt is also being somewhat disingenuous when he describes Meyers as “not taking chances” when the fact remains that it is only very recently, and largely due to Meyers’ pioneering big-budget gamble into the field with *Something’s Gotta Give*, that older women’s romcoms stand a chance of being made in post-classical cinema. Rather than being only “lightweight”, in among the golden Californian exteriors and lavish interiors of Jane’s (Meryl Streep) sprawling

home and patisserie, *It's Complicated* is a film that constructs a vibrant older woman protagonist who it celebrates and embraces, who is still desired and desiring at a time in her life when our culture habitually tells women that the possibility of romance is now passed. Amongst the generic contrivances, here is a film that for all its slapstick humour and Flomax gags nevertheless manages to turn a momentary spotlight on some of the absurd gendered disparities surrounding ageing and romance today and to look afresh at how they have been normalised. The preposterousness of the scene at the fertility clinic, for example, where a series of older men sit with their young trophy wives awaiting treatment, and where the prospect of fathering a new baby at 58 despite his falling sperm levels fills Jake (Alec Baldwin) not with youthful vigour but despair; and Jane’s tentatively asking Adam (Steve Martin) on their first date, “I’m not too old for you?”, to which he quite logically, but unexpectedly for our culture, responds, “How can you be too old for me, when I’m older than you?”

Again too, we can see in *It's Complicated* that it is the male protagonists, rather than Jane, who are more troubled, more discontent in their golden years. Both Adam and Jane have been through divorces but, after time and therapy, Jane is now at peace with this chapter of her past whereas for Adam it is still painfully raw; he listens to earnest self-help CDs while he drives beseeching him to grant forgiveness and is far more anxious than she is about risking new hurt by embarking on another relationship. For all his bravado and charm, Jake’s world appears to be crashing down around his ears: he is at the beck and call of his intimidating young wife, Agness, and her hyperactive five-year old son Pedro, and at a time in his life when he had imagined he would be starting to cut back at work and coast a little, he is being compelled to father a new child at Agness’ insistence. As he reaps the seeds sown by his mid-life crisis and rues the day his infidelity cost him the marriage and home comforts he once shared with Jane, he admits, “I’m a walking cliché.” After they embark on their affair he sits by Jane’s bath one evening, eating her home-made ice-cream and tells her, “I love how quiet it is in your house...I have no quiet in my life. Ever.” and confesses “My marriage is... not turning out as I hoped.” Hence it is Jake who pursues Jane relentlessly, as if floundering desperately to find a way to put

his life back in order. Meanwhile, Jane has evidently built a highly successful business, is close to her children, enjoys the friendship and support of a loving circle of friends and, like Kate in *Last Chance Harvey*, still believes ambitions can be fulfilled (in Jane's case, hiring an architectural firm to remodel her dream home).

Again, this is not to say that Jane is entirely content with her lot, as some telling moments infer. In a meeting with her architect she instructs them not to build "his and her sinks" in her new bathroom; there is no "his" in her life, no prospect of a "his" likely again, she admits, and the unused extra basin makes her "feel bad." In another scene early in the film, her daughter leaves home and Jane faces her first night on her own there. She gazes alone out the kitchen window for just a moment and the audience anticipates that a familiar melancholy vision of an older woman left to contemplate the "empty nest" is about to unfold; but then she quickly catches herself, and seems to stop the reverie before it takes hold. For Jane is still bold, vital, and very much her own woman; when her children cancel the dinner plans she'd made for them all in New York at her son's graduation, she doesn't permit herself to sit alone in her hotel, but instead makes a confident entrance into the restaurant having reserved a table for one. Indeed, it is *Jake*, rather than Jane, who seems most nostalgic for the domestic life they once had, as he looks longingly at the family assembled together at her home and, inveigling himself an invitation to stay, suggests they have a "Movie night, just like old times." It is Jane who finally calls the affair off, realising she doesn't need Jake and telling him, "I've had a pretty good life these last 10 years. I have figured it out. I no longer feel alone, or divorced. I just feel normal."

Back in the spotlight

But what is "normal" finally in the world of the romcom and mainstream cinema? While there is a good deal that seems progressive and somewhat atypical of Hollywood in these films, there is nevertheless the inescapable sense that ultimately, like most of their bedfellows, they primarily celebrate normative heterosexuality and coupledness. The answer to these women's latent wish to find satisfaction and fulfilment in later life is apparently embedded, just as it is for younger women, in finding the right man against the odds. Any effort to champion the radical impulses of a Hollywood movement is perhaps inevitably fated to find contradictions in the process and a feminist reading of these films is by no means unproblematic; hence, even while it is invigorating to see older women allowed the right to active sexuality, there is something simultaneously very conformist in how these men, their new and unexpected partners, are represented as being the holders of the keys that will unlock these women's full potential and give them a new lease of life. These films can perhaps be understood as awkward, tentative steps by the industry towards exploring or addressing some of the discriminatory practices it has itself adopted with regard to representing older women over decades of filmmaking, and to meeting the needs of older audiences who have long been neglected. In both respects there is much ground to be made up. But despite, or even because of their flaws, these films still undeniably offer some of the most nuanced, thoughtful and engaging representations of older women to make it to mainstream screens since the golden age of melodrama. As such, romantic comedy is helping slowly turn the tide in an industry that has too long presumed that "women of a certain age" have left their leading lady years

behind them. And for this reason and more, these films demonstrate that the genre undeniably merits a more discerning critical eye than the notion of "lightweight" affords.

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Notes

- 1 Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (Routledge, 2009): 8.
- 2 Laremy Legel, "Is Definitely, Maybe the last of the real romantic comedies?" (www.film.com, June 24 2008): web
- 3 Stacey Abbott and Deborah Jermyn (eds) *Falling in Love Again: Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema* (IB Tauris, 2009): 3.
- 4 I use the term "classical style" to indicate that these are films in which many of the genre's traditional conventions and structures are still observed and the key storyline/relationship is still that of a heterosexual romantic relationship. This is in contrast to other emergent subgenres, such as those more explicitly male-targeted films which incorporate gross-out humour and centre more on male protagonists and friendships, despite pursuing heterosexual romances, cf titles such as *The Wedding Crashers* (2005) or *The 40 Year Old Virgin* (2005).
- 5 Margaret Tally, 'Something's gotta give: Hollywood, female sexuality and the "older bird" chick flick' in Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (eds) *Chick Flicks: Contemporary Women at the Movies* (Routledge, 2008): 119.
- 6 Taken from the promotional material for *Last Chance Harvey*.
- 7 Susan Sontag, 'The Double Standard of Aging', (September, 1972) (www.uplift.com/mediawatch): web
- 8 Alistair Harkness, review *Last Chance Harvey* (*The Scotsman*, June 5, 2009): web
- 9 Ibid. web
- 10 Anna Smith, review *Last Chance Harvey* (www.empireonline, nd): web
- 11 Warren Clements, 'From syrupy story to spoof to downright scary', (*The Globe and Mail*, May 8, 2009): web
- 12 Wendy Ides, review *Last Chance Harvey* (*The Times*, June 4, 2009): web
- 13 Manohla Dargis, 'The Clock You Hear? It's Not Big Ben, Buddy' (*The New York Times*, December 25, 2008): web
- 14 Roger Ebert, review *Last Chance Harvey* (www.rogerebert.com, January 14, 2009): web
- 15 Interestingly, *It's Complicated* also plays with this motif when it is Adam, not Jane, who performs the 'dressing-up montage' by modelling a series of outfits for her when they talk on Skype and seeking her advice as to whether he should keep or discard them.
- 16 Emma Thompson, 'Emma Thompson's First Blog Post...talking about Last Chance Harvey' (midlifebloggers.com, January 16, 2009): web
- 17 Roberta Garrett observes that, "by the beginning of the 2000s, the classical romantic comedy formula—which had not hitherto been regarded as a specifically female form—had become synonymous with the more recent phenomena of the popular 'chick-flick'." *Postfeminist Chick Flicks: The Return of the Women's Film* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) p.93.
- 18 Dargis: web
- 19 Tim Robey, review *Last Chance Harvey*, (*The Telegraph*, June 4, 2009): web
- 20 Negra, pp.61-2.
- 21 Ibid. p.9.
- 22 Alex Hobbs, 'Romancing the Crone: Hollywood's Recent Mature Love Stories', paper presented at the 'Rom-Com, Actually' conference, De Montfort University (March 2-3, 2011)
- 23 Garrett, p.113.
- 24 Anna Smith, review of *It's Complicated*, (*Time Out London*, January 5-13, 2010): web
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Daryl Wiggers, 'Enough Already: The Wonderful Horrible Reception of Nancy Meyers', (*CineAction*, no 81, 2010): p.65
- 27 Rick Groen, 'Crowd-pleasing wish fulfilment—that's easy', (*The Globe and Mail*, December 23, 2009): web
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Nicholas Barber, review of *It's Complicated*, (*The Independent*, January 10, 2010): web
- 30 Kirk Honeycutt, review of *It's Complicated*, (*The Hollywood Reporter*, December 10, 2009): web
- 31 Kevin Maher, review of *It's Complicated*, (*The Times*, January 10, 2010): web Wiggers, p.68.

Gran Torino

CLINT EASTWOOD AS FALLEN SAVIOUR

BY WILLIAM BEARD

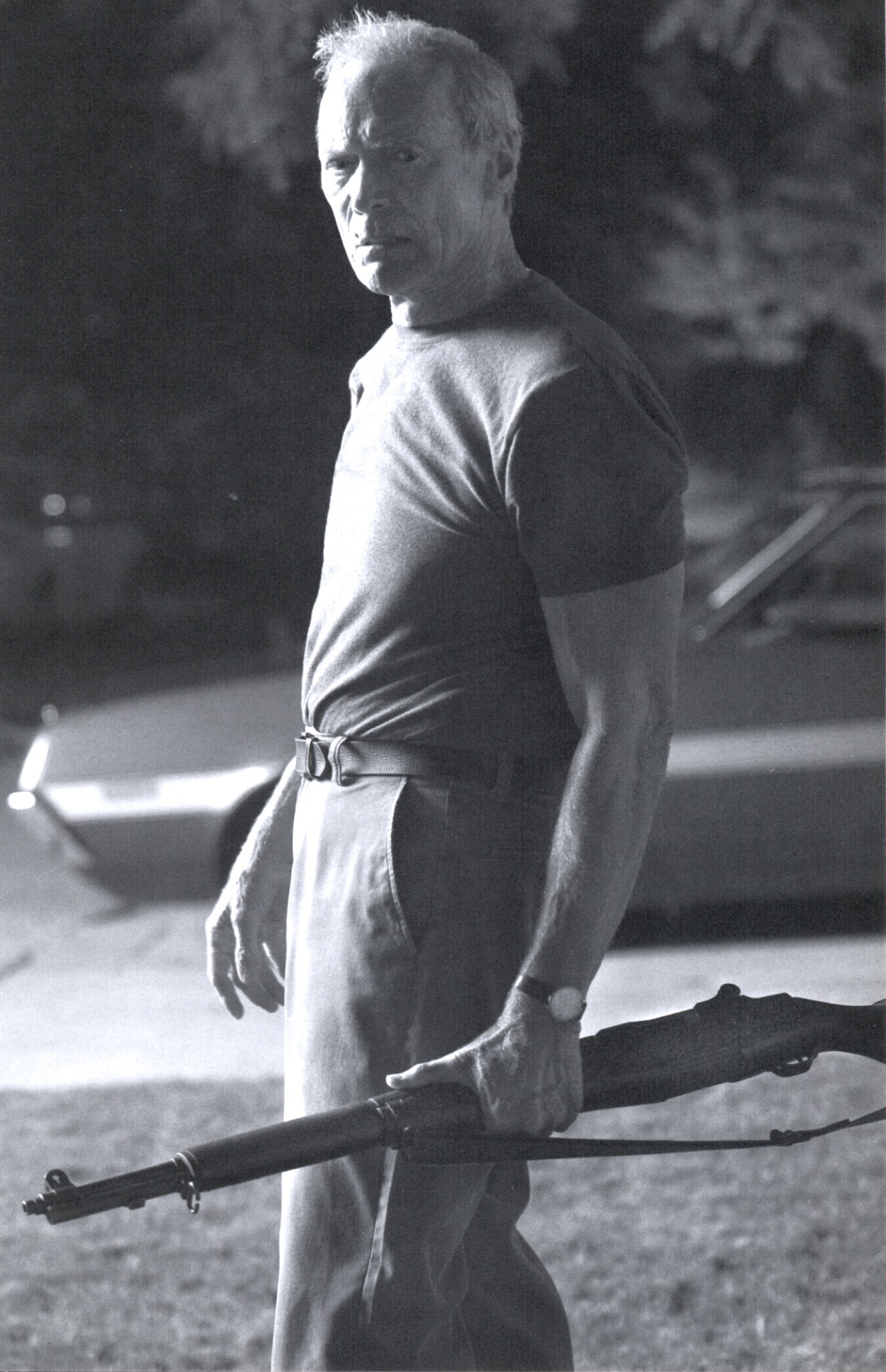
By now everyone has recognized that Clint Eastwood is an interesting filmmaker, and quite a few have picked up how relentlessly self-referential his cinema is—especially his own appearances in his own cinema. In a sense, Eastwood never plays anybody other than himself no matter what movie he is in. The important thing about him as an actor is his *size*, which is a matter quite separate from any questions of mastery of the techniques of mimicry. But unlike any of his possible competitors as a screen archetype of heroic authenticity, Eastwood has managed and sculpted his career with complete control for 40 years, and has, precisely, *deployed* that larger-than-life persona of his in ways that are completely self-conscious throughout that whole period.

Moreover, Eastwood has also been very sensitive to the cultural and ideological environment in which he has found himself, and the extraordinary changes that have characterized his persona and his cinema over the past forty years have always been reflective of that environment in some way. The decade between 1967 and 1977—coinciding exactly with the first decade of Eastwood's career as a star in Hollywood—was a dark one in America: the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, growing disaster in Vietnam internationally and anti-war protests and ghetto riots nationally, eventually Nixon and Watergate. And the Hollywood films of that time were negative in a completely unprecedented way. The level of popular cynicism was so high that it was well-nigh impossible to construct any kind of prosocial narrative in a movie, and the only kind of powerful and effective heroic archetypes available were of a regressive, angry, violent type. That is what Charles Bronson characters of this era were, and that is what Dirty Harry was as well. (Meanwhile in the Western Eastwood was constructing a character of mysterious amoral transcendent violence that was as far from the essentially prosocial role of the cowboy hero as can be imagined.) Already in this period Eastwood was busy pointing to the deliberately mythic, anti-realist nature of the heroic persona, and it is fascinating to chart the denaturalizing elements scattered through movies dominated by a nominal ethic of gritty realism.

Towards the end of the seventies, Eastwood's cinema began to reconstruct forms of prosociality, and prosocial heroism. The

same year that Rocky Balboa ran up those steps in Philadelphia, Eastwood painfully reconstituted a kind of socially positive cowboy hero out of charred remnants in *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), and in the subsequent decade the angry and solitary Eastwood persona began to integrate itself more into society and social projects. *Bronco Billy* (1980) and *Heartbreak Ridge* (1986) were almost Reaganite in their appeals to believe in something that would make you feel better, no matter how ridiculous that thing was. Meanwhile, Dirty Harry and his relatives in Eastwood's cinema began, in movies like *Sudden Impact* (1983) and *Tightrope* (1984), to show for the first time something that might exist inside that character, and to draw him outside of mythic righteousness and into something more accountable. The 1990s then saw the maturation of this project, in deeply conflicted tales of heroic leadership like *White Hunter, Black Heart* (1990) and *In the Line of Fire* (1993), and ultimately in those twin masterpieces of complexity and self-deconstruction, *Unforgiven* (1992) and *A Perfect World* (1993)—films that took the two most important bastions of heroism in Eastwood's cinema, the charismatic man of violence and the charismatic Good Father, and subjected them to a withering examination.¹

After *Unforgiven* Clint Eastwood the filmmaker was seen differently, in a more serious light. Critics were then willing to forgive a succession of movies that were quite disappointing (*Absolute Power* [1997], *True Crime* [1999], and *Blood Work* [2002]), movies that were puzzling and unsatisfactory (*Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* [1997]), and even movies that were embarrassingly bad (*Space Cowboys* [2000]). Or at least when Eastwood came out of that barren patch into the recent series of high-profile critical successes that includes *Mystic River* (2003), *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006), *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006), and *Changeling* (2008), few were completely surprised. After this set of films no-one could fail to see in Eastwood a creative personality capable of darkness, doubt, and difficulty. The topic of Eastwood's ageing, and how he was handling it in his onscreen roles, emerged ever more insistently as well.² In Clint Eastwood's recent cinema, the spectacle of America's most granite-like, indestructible icon of masculine power sinking into age and doubt has compelled a



kind of awed fascination, like watching huge chunks of a disintegrating ice-shelf falling into the sea. It has a momentous, eschatological quality. Such is Eastwood's symbolic power that the darkness of his recent cinema has, I would suggest, functioned also as a chilling cultural recognition that his darkening has been like an objective correlative of the darkening of American power and invincibility in general. Postmodern Hollywood generally expresses such intimations by means of frenzied distraction and shallow panic, but Eastwood's slow, weighty, substantial version is a horse of a different colour - a pale horse, you might say.

Mystic River is the first and best of this succession, one of Eastwood's very finest films. As a pretty straight adaptation of Patrick Lehane's excellent novel, it is unexceptionable. But its greatness—and I don't think that is too serious an overstatement—lies in an area of activity it shares with *Unforgiven*: namely, in its project of revising the assumptions of natural justice and violent personal intervention to rectify crime and wrongdoing that are at the heart not only of the behaviour of Dirty Harry and all his brethren, but of a thousand other Hollywood movie heroes who take the law into their own hands. In particular it skewers the subgenre of vengeful protective fathers whose daughters have been victimized. When Harrison Ford, or Mel Gibson, or in a particularly lamentable recent case Liam Neeson find themselves in these roles, they lay into the malefactors with no regard for legal niceties. Eastwood himself has always been particularly ready to kill bad guys with complete disregard for the law to protect females, and can be seen doing this as recently as 1997, in *Absolute Power*. But the vigilante justice practiced by the Sean Penn character in *Mystic River* is so catastrophic in its outcome, its underlying attitudes and seductive emotional appeal so clearly shown as dangerous, that it stands as a condemnation of the whole genre. Again, a genre in which Eastwood has flourished.

Million Dollar Baby is in one way a more typical product for its director—namely in its violent schizophrenia of tone and affect. It starts out as an old-fashioned feelgood movie with old-fashioned feelgood characters: the aging Eastwood character is reclaimed from his backwater life full of regrets, and his young protégée Hilary Swank from her dismal proletarian origins, while simultaneously the movie is hitting every softball odd-couple cliché pitch out of the park. Then, almost without warning, it turns instantly into a full-bore melodrama of the darkest hue, and ends in scenes of almost hysterical emotional pain and tragic loss. Oscars rained down on it, probably in appreciation of both its almost-vanished traditional qualities and the artillery weight of its final seriousness. But not many commented on how surreal was this juxtaposition of comedy and tragedy, and even fewer on how, in this movie, instead of just saving the girl, the Eastwood character now has to kill her.

The Iwo Jima diptych astonished everyone, and can stand as a kind of textbook example of how Eastwood has become American cinema's most complex mainstream filmmaker when it comes to seeing more than one side of a question. *Letters from Iwo Jima* received the bulk of the praise and the awards, and it is an almost-art-movie like Eastwood's *Bird* (1988) that tries to redress some kind of political imbalance in representation. It is solemn and worthy (Eastwood's recent film *Invictus* [2009] is another example of the type). But *Flags of Our Fathers* is a really radical assault on the received patriotic mythography of the Good War and the Greatest Generation, relentlessly documenting the layers of erroneous perceptions, outright lies, and

crass hucksterism lying behind the photograph of the raising of the Stars and Stripes on Iwo Jima. This image, called by many American commentators the most famous and most stirring war photograph of all time, is revealed to have been a routine task mistaken immediately for a glorious moment of heroism, and then sold as such at the expense of truth, authenticity, integrity, and the personal lives of the soldiers who were drafted into a massive war-bonds campaign of sickening phoniness—which, however, succeeded in raising huge amounts of money for the war effort. Here we see Eastwood again taking the crooked path, again insisting on looking beneath the surface of a cliché or stereotype and seeing that its heroic stature is grounded in some kind of mistake or lie. The last film of the series, *Changeling* (2008), is another fairly worthy project and fairly good movie that is less interesting than it ought to be. At the centre of the plot is another iteration of that highly characteristic Eastwood notion of substitution, fabrication, and lies in the interest of a good story. In Los Angeles in the late 1920s, a lost child is restored to his mother, and even the mother's protest that this is not her son cannot derail the collective will to celebrate this happy ending, and in particular the insistence on the police department that has declared this victory.

Which brings us to *Gran Torino* (2008). Here is one description of the film. A decorated Korean War vet name Walt Kowalski, retired after decades working in the Ford plant, is the last white man in his formerly Polish Detroit neighbourhood, now occupied by Hmong immigrants from southeast Asia. He is a scowling, permanently pissed-off misanthrope, sitting on his porch all day drinking beer and muttering racist imprecations at his neighbours. He also has family problems: his wife has just died, he doesn't like his two sons at all, and he's positively disgusted by his texting, navel-ringed granddaughter. He is also contemptuous of the extremely young priest who tries to comfort him. He is very unhappy about how the whole world has gone to hell: his city, his neighbourhood, his race, his culture. Since he is inhabiting the stereotype of the grumpy old guy next door, and also since he's Clint Eastwood, there is a limit to the amount of audience disgust this behaviour might otherwise cause. When he starts literally growling at the objects of his contempt the effect is frankly comic and audiences invariably chuckle aloud. In Walt's garage is a mint 1972 Ford Gran Torino that he helped build himself, a last remnant of an older time. But through the routine exercise of his get-off-my-lawn belligerence, he accidentally intervenes in a crisis of the Hmong family that lives next door, momentarily saving their teenaged boy, Thao, from being inducted into a gang. He's deluged with gifts from the neighbourhood women, he gets to know Thao's older sister Sue and likes her, and he ends up mentoring Thao and getting him a job. This discovery of the humanity of his neighbours—and even more his discovery of his own humanity—effects the redemption of his life, and when the gang escalates the violence against the people next door he sacrifices his life to ensure their arrest and imprisonment.

At many moments in the early and middle parts of the film, *Gran Torino* resembles a very old Hollywood stereotype of a particular kind of sentimental comedy-drama (though actually the stereotype goes back well into the silent era). In this, as in many ways, the movie repeats a basic quality of *Million Dollar Baby*, where the relationship between crusty old Clint and fresh-faced Hilary Swank seems to go all the way back to King Vidor's 1931 version of *The Champ*. *Gran Torino* evokes other archetypes, in particular the host of movies that show an older man teaching



and initiating a younger one, to heartening effect—a sub-genre that includes movies as different as *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1948), *The Karate Kid* (1984), and Eastwood's own *Outlaw Josey Wales* and especially *Honkytonk Man* (1982). Moreover the film also can find ancestors in the cantankerous-grandpa sub-genre, for example Monty Woolley movies from the 1940s like *The Man Who Came to Dinner* (1942) or *Since You Went Away* (1944), where under his barnacled exterior the old grump is revealed to have a heart of gold. Those movies are funny and heartwarming, and they are exactly the stereotype that *Gran Torino* keeps flirting heavily with. The early scenes between Walt and Sue, the extended comedy of Walt's reaction to the gifts of food and flowers that Hmong matrons keep piling up on his front steps, and the scenes of fake insult between Walt and his barber hit the "funny" note squarely, while his growing attachment to the two Asian kids strikes the "heartwarming" note with equal resonance. The basic model here is of a very soft movie.

The funny and heartwarming movie is actually there in *Gran Torino*, and so is the more serious sentimental drama of Walt's rediscovery of his humanity and his ascent to responsible leadership. In fact it is very easy to imagine a version of the film where Walt's death doesn't happen, where he manages to defeat the purpose of the gang, save the family and the boy and become completely integrated into his Asianized neighbourhood, and then goes on to repair relations with his own family, start going to church again, and feel better about everything. But the *Gran Torino* we actually have is a very long way from being a feelgood movie. One of its faces is heartwarming, but the other face is like a dark inversion—a heart-chilling movie. That's a face that is predicted in the black and ominous posters from the movie, and felt in the chord of dark despair that is like an underlying pedal-point that never quite leaves the film no matter how sentimental or comic things may momentarily become. The story of redemption is achieved only in the context of a landscape so filled with loss and failure as to be frankly appalling.

When Walt brings out his Army-issue M1 rifle and aims it in a very intense way at one of the young men in the Asian gang who has strayed onto his lawn, he scares off the bad guys and rectifies an injustice. The fact that he has no intention of doing anybody a good turn and that his action is one of reflex anger and potential homicide is something that most viewers skate right past, because they are responding so immediately to the most powerful and familiar stereotype of the scene: a righteously angry Clint Eastwood intimidating punks. The more troglodytic members of the audience may also be buying fully into the hard-right understanding of Eastwood's archetypal Dirty Harry persona: as the white guy who ought to be in charge actually taking charge by killing, or at least scaring the bejeezus out of, racial Others who are criminals. Natural justice and proper racial hierarchy are reinstituted simultaneously by this action of the power hero. Then when he happens across some black street thugs molesting Sue, he once more steps effortlessly, at age 78, into the tough-as-hell good guy who is going to save you from all the punks running around your city. (He remarks to one of them, "Ever notice you come across somebody once in a while you shouldn't have fucked with?") In a later stage of his efforts to save Thao from the Asian gang he beats up one of them badly. Viewers watch these familiar actions with great satisfaction: this cranky old guy is going to rehabilitate himself by turning into Clint Eastwood. And also:

Clint Eastwood can still do it! The world is still safe!

What is also notable in this sequence of events is the way that Eastwood has consciously chosen to paraphrase his earlier avatars. Every second reviewer of the film mentioned that Walt Kowalski is Dirty Harry in retirement. The trademark basilisk squint, constant bad temper, and hoarse moments of verbal defiance are all Harry. The image of Eastwood looking viciously, and indeed insanely, down the barrel of a long gun also brings vividly to mind the frightening William Munny of *Unforgiven's* final scenes of carnage. None of these characters, not even the later Josey Wales, could be described as "heartwarming" in any way, though, and that thought does redirect us to the idea that it is a very strange project to try to make Dirty Harry into a neighbourly guy who can actually get along with people, when almost the whole of Harry's attraction to viewers in the first place lay in his incarnation of the desire for angry payback.

It is interesting to compare the personalities of these four characters (Harry, Josey, Munny, Walt), and in particular to see the way in which the films relate their violence to their personal lives and especially to their commitment to wives and families. They are all widowers, and this fact is important in every case, because each one is left in some kind of position of existential bereavement, some condition of irreparable loss, that is also something that totally enables their violent behaviour. Harry Callahan's wife is dead, killed in a car accident; we can all feel sorry for the poor man and respect his loss, while intuiting how convenient it is that he should be freed of all softer feelings while undertaking his life's work of blowing away punks. In *The Outlaw Josey Wales* the matter is actually one of the subjects of the film: Josey becomes a fearsome killer because his wife and son were murdered by Kansas border raiders, and has to climb painfully back to humanity by acquiring a new wife and a new community. *Unforgiven* spells the matter out even more clearly: William Munny was rescued from his career of inflicting violent atrocities on his fellow human beings by the love of a good woman, and it is only because she is now dead that he is able to resume his old ways. *Gran Torino* begins with the funeral of Walt's wife—whom he later refers to as "the best woman who ever walked this earth"—and it is clear that she was his emotional bulwark even when he was profoundly disappointed by the other members of his family and buffeted by the decline of everything in his world. There is a "feminine" layer in the psyches of all these Eastwood characters (and several other examples of his powerful male), and it is always at some stage deeply buried and requires excavation.

But *Gran Torino* is also advancing the project of so many of Eastwood's later films: to renounce violence, and to understand how it does not solve problems but in fact creates worse ones than the ones it was supposed to solve. In the Dirty Harry movies, the world needs Harry Callahan's violence, and in *The Outlaw Josey Wales* the hero's violent power is necessary to the constitution of the new community. But in *Unforgiven* the proper vengeance that can only be achieved by Eastwood the killer is a bitter and hollow victory, one that signals not the triumph of the hero and his good aims, but their terrible defeat. *Gran Torino* studies its hero's propensity to violence, and traces it fundamentally to his experience in the Korean War. That taught him how to use the M-1 rifle that he still brandishes, it taught him how to kill and how to survive and be strong under unimaginable pressures. Walt's anger, and also his extensive repertory of racial insults and his reflexive instinct to regard Asians as the other and the enemy, come directly from Korea.



As he tells one of the Asian gang members he is facing down, "we used to stack fucks like you five feet high in Korea, use you for sandbags." But Walt's honourable military service to his country, whose flag hangs in front of his house and all around town, is not something he can be proud of. Patriotic pride keeps turning to acid in his mouth because his glorious wartime violence keeps presenting itself to him as a crime against humanity. At a relatively early point in the film he remarks to a drinking buddy "I lived almost 3 years in Korea, where we shot men, stabbed 'em with bayonets, hacked 17-year-olds to death with shovels—things I'll remember till the day I die, horrible things." He articulates this torment most fully in a speech to Thao at the end of the movie:

You want to know how it feels to kill a man? It feels awful, that's what. The only thing worse is getting a medal of valor for killing a kid who wanted to just give up. Yeah! some scared little gook just like you. I shot him right in the face with that rifle you were holding just now. Not a day goes by that I don't think about it...

These haunted recollections of violence committed are echoes

of William Munny's in *Unforgiven*, sitting in the firelight and asking his best friend, "Ned, you remember that drover I shot, the teeth came out the back of his head?", or his dream of seeing another of his victims: "His head was all broke open...you could see inside of it...worms were coming out." These are not thoughts that trouble Harry Callahan. In the scenes leading up to his speech to Thao just quoted, Walt has beaten up a gang member in retaliation for gang intimidation. That righteous violence has resulted in getting the gang not to go away, but instead to beat and rape Sue. And Walt's reaction to this now is not to strike back, but to provoke the gang to shoot him down unarmed in front of witnesses. Eastwood wins this war not by killing, but by being killed in a spectacular act of passive resistance. It is astonishing to realize how Eastwood has gotten to this almost Gandhi-esque passivist position by inhabiting the stereotype of the vengeful Eastwood hero.

It is equally amazing to think how what at one point was a Monty Woolley movie has turned into something almost too dark to think about. Because we must now factor into our reading all the ways that the narrative of *Gran Torino* seems like a national allegory. Eastwood is the last remnant of a once-proud white nation. He sits, a symbol of the patriotic white working class, at the far end of old age surveying the wreckage of that

nation: in the disappearance of his ethnic neighbourhood, in the bankruptcy of American car-makers and the awful desolation of Detroit, in the decadence of white American culture that has made his son into a Toyota salesman and his granddaughter into a narcissist airhead. On his porch is a large Stars and Stripes. And the Gran Torino in his garage is the emblem of Walt Kowalski as Walt is the emblem of a certain kind of America. In case you're extremely slow, the movie names itself after the car to make things ultra-clear. That Gran Torino, and Walt's days on the assembly line, represent the Good Old Days, and now they're gone forever. All that can be done, says the movie in a very forthright way, is hand over the reins of power to whatever citizens show a true commitment to right values, even if they're the racial Other. And in fact not only are Thao and Sue more dedicated and willing than his own children seem to be, but the entire Hmong culture, in which the women surround Walt with attentions and great food, seems like a distinct improvement on the pathetic and insulting birthday presents he gets from his son and daughter-in-law: a telephone with jumbo-number dialing pad and an implement to pick things up without having to bend over. When all the neighborhood women pile up gifts at Walt's front door, it's funny (especially when their persistence prompts Walt to mumble "Jesus, Joseph and Mary, these Hmong broads are like badgers!") But there is also the subtext that they can recognize Clint Eastwood for what he is even if his own people can't. The symbolism of Walt's bequest of the Gran Torino to Thao, and the film's last shot of Thao behind its wheel driving away to the (truly regrettable) musical accompaniment of the director singing a sentimental song of his own composition, could hardly be clearer. Clint Eastwood has passed the best values of America to the Asian Other who embodies its best ideals. White America will just have to get over itself, although there remains the fact that its multicultural inheritors will take possession not through their own endeavours, but at the hands of Clint Eastwood, WASP Number One.³

But the more closely we examine the Good Old Days in *Gran Torino*, the more disquieting they become, until at last they begin to seem like something worm-eaten and awful. At first sight, that past seems like a golden time when giants roamed the earth—giants like Clint Eastwood and the 1972 Gran Torino—and the national landscape was a simpler and better place, at least for majoritarian white culture. Just consider, however, the actual past referred to in the film. Two dates stand out as reference points: 1952 and 1972. The first is the time of Walt's service in the Korean War. It is pretty much a forgotten war, sandwiched between the Good War (World War II) and the Bad War (Vietnam), and it is no surprise to hear one of Walt's grandkids ask "What is Korea?" But it is Clint Eastwood's war. Too young for World War II, Eastwood was drafted to serve in Korea, but after surviving an airplane crash off San Diego he was held back from combat and assigned to training duties while his fellow-recruits went off to slaughter. He has already recalled this war in his cinema, in *Heartbreak Ridge*, where he plays a 50-something Marine sergeant whose bleak memories of his experience in Korea are reflected in the movie's title, named after the site of a particularly bloody engagement. Even in that half-jingoistic movie, the presiding spirit is not glory that has vanished, but heartbreak that persists. In *Gran Torino* Korea is doubly memorialized, first in the flag on Walt's porch and the evident fact that the war was some kind of character-forming moment that made Eastwood into Eastwood; but second as a

fundamental bedrock of horror and self-loathing. Korea is not something to be proud of, but something to be eaten up with guilt and regret over. So the Stars and Stripes on Walt's front porch now means something different, and the American flags plastered all over his other regular hangouts (the bar, the hardware store, the barber shop) have *their* meanings altered as well.

Walt came back from Korea and got a job at the Ford plant. The next decade might have been a time of stability and prosperity for him and for America (if you forget the fears of nuclear annihilation and other Cold War phobias), but beginning in 1963 things began to go very sour in the US. 1963 was the year of John Kennedy's assassination, and it was quickly followed by the escalation of the Vietnam War, the hippie movement and draft-dodging countercultural protest and their backlash, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, ghetto riots in many American cities (including Detroit), police riots at the Democratic National Convention of 1968 and elsewhere, the Tet Offensive of 1968, Johnson's resignation and the election of Richard Nixon, the Laotian and Cambodian bombing campaigns, and the ever-clearer spectre of final defeat in Vietnam. In 1972, that second historical point of reference in *Gran Torino*, Jane Fonda went to Hanoi, nobody could avoid any more the recognition that the war was definitively lost, Nixon won re-election on a platform of negotiations, and the Watergate break-ins took place.

The Oscar winner in 1972 was *The Godfather*, and winners or nominees in the couple of years previously and the couple of years following included *Midnight Cowboy*, *They Shoot Horses Don't They?*, *Five Easy Pieces*, *The French Connection*, *Kluge*, *Serpico*, *Deliverance*, *McCabe and Mrs Miller*, *Cabaret*, *Godfather II*, *Chinatown* and *The Conversation*. Over the few years after that there were *Dog Day Afternoon*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Nashville* and *Taxi Driver*. Of course if you didn't like these respectable Oscar-nominated movies you could have been watching *Easy Rider* or *Electra Glide in Blue*, *The Wild Bunch* or *Soldier Blue*, *Dirty Harry* or *Death Wish*, *Night of the Living Dead* or *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. In fact, 1972 represents something close to the epicentre of the ugliest and most traumatized decade in Hollywood history, and in the history of American moviegoing.

On television, a far more toothless medium in the area of social commentary than it is today, 1971 saw the debut of Archie Bunker, in the series *All in the Family*, which ran for the rest of the decade. Almost as many reviews mentioned Walt Kowalski's similarity to Archie Bunker as they did his similarity to Harry Callahan. Bunker, of course, was a comically ignorant representative of the bigoted working class—a charter member of Nixon's "silent majority"—whose weekly rants against hippies, ethnic others, and homosexuals caricatured a set of values that nevertheless managed to get extensively articulated over the life of the show. His angry and offensive views were played for laughs, just as Walt's are for a good part of *Gran Torino*, and the laughter in both places serves to cover a recognition of severe social tension whose causes and cures both are too difficult and dangerous to be explored openly and in depth.

In 1967, five years before the Gran Torino was built, Detroit was torn apart by the second most serious riot of the 20th century in America. It lasted five days, the National Guard and other Army units were sent in, and it ended with 43 dead, 467 wounded, 7,200 arrested and over 2,000 buildings burnt down—and gave rise to cover stories in both *Time* and *Life*

magazines. Looking back at the aftermath, Detroit's five-term black mayor, Coleman Young, wrote:

Detroit's losses went a hell of a lot deeper than the immediate toll of lives and buildings. The riot put Detroit on the fast track to economic desolation, mugging the city and making off with incalculable value in jobs, earnings taxes, corporate taxes, retail dollars, sales taxes, mortgages, interest, property taxes, development dollars, investment dollars, tourism dollars, and plain damn money. The money was carried out in the pockets of the businesses and the white people who fled as fast as they could.⁴

The desolation that has overtaken Walt Kowalski's district of Detroit may or may not be a direct result of this initial white flight, but what has happened there is certainly part of a process that was beginning even before 1972. As for the Hmong incursion into Detroit, when Walt testily asks Sue what her people are doing there, why didn't they just stay home, she points out that they are refugees from America's involvement in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos; that because they were U.S. allies they were compelled to flee after the U.S. withdrawal. That process too began in 1972.

Other events were conspiring to devastate the reign of the dinosaurs as well. The crucial event was the Arab oil embargo of 1973–74, which arose from American military support for Israel during the Yom Kippur War and the failure of America to broker a Middle East peace agreement. The embargo in turn gave rise to Congressional enactment of CAFE (vehicle fuel efficiency) standards in 1975, and the new desire for fuel-efficient cars among many American consumers gave a large boost to Japanese and other foreign car sales in the U.S., and delivered a serious blow to the species of Detroit land-yacht sauropods that had ruled the road for decades. The oil crisis was the first of several, and it has now metamorphosed into the global warming crisis, whose apocalyptic warnings essentially say that triumphalist American über-consumerism is not only over for America itself but has contributed materially to the doom of the entire planet. That's a pretty severe comedown, and looking at Walt's gleaming '72 Gran Torino sitting in his driveway—cleaned, waxed, polished, and tuned to a fare-thee-well—it's hard not to accept it simply as a powerful symbol of nostalgia for a time before all that bad stuff happened to automobile culture.

But as with so many of the instant readings that viewers are liable to make in the film, this one too begins to crumble under inspection. It is fascinating to read a review of the movie by Damon Bell in the car enthusiast publication *Consumer Guide Automotive*. Here are a few of his illuminating remarks:

It's telling that Walt's prized possession is a 1972 Ford Gran Torino. Why a Gran Torino, and not a more obvious classic muscle car, like a GTO "Judge," a Chevelle SS 396, or even an earlier (and more handsome) Ford Torino Cobra? No '72 Gran Torino is especially rare, exotic, or valuable. In both image and actual performance, it was an automotive also-ran that never quite ascended to icon status. And in the universe of vintage collector cars, any Gran Torino (they were produced from 1972 to '76) is a "C-list" car at best.

Furthermore, the 1972 model year heralded the sad end of the muscle-car era, and of Detroit's

unquestioned dominance of the automotive market. Motown's high-horsepower big-block beasts were suddenly a dying breed, thanks to new emissions regulations, spiraling insurance costs, and a changing social climate. The '72 Gran Torino's highest-horsepower engine option was a lukewarm 248-horsepower 351 V8—a far cry from the 370 horsepower-plus big blocks of just two years prior. And the road ahead for Detroit held depressing developments like 5-mph bumpers that wreaked havoc on sleek styling, an OPEC oil embargo, and sinking quality control standards.

...In 2009, [the '72 Gran Torino's] appeal to the masses is primarily as a retro, kitschy curiosity.... Clearly, the makers of *Gran Torino* didn't just happen upon this car... they chose it very carefully for its symbolic value.... But in the cold light of history, with all sentimentality stripped away, maybe the "good ol' days" weren't so unfailingly great after all.... A pitch-perfect job of automotive casting, I'd say.⁵

"The 'good ol' days' may not have been so unfailingly great after all," says Bell. I would go further: there were no good old days. The nostalgia for a more stable and comforting time that's inscribed all over the incidentals of Walt Kowalski's life, habits, and environment is a nostalgia for something that never existed—a mythology cobbled together from shards and airbrushed stereotypes. Only in the ageing of his body has Walt's life experienced a real decline. His life always was fractured, conflicted and haunted. All of the supposed bellwethers of his existence—service in Korea, family, work, community—have transformed under examination into something bad. It's not so much that everything has turned to shit, it's that so much of everything was shit all along.

It is the same story for the America that Walt is a symbol for. This is a point that *Gran Torino* emphasizes by reaching back past the let's-all-be-friends Clintonite 90s and the deliberately amnesiac and reality-denying Reaganite 80s to the traumatic decade of the 1970s. The national sickness is one with deep roots that definitely go back way past 9/11 and now gives rise to an awful sense not that the ideal nation has declined from a glorious peak, but that it was always some kind of mirage. With this haunting intimation standing at the door, *Gran Torino's* outcome seems less like a sentimental nice thought and more like a desperate wish. Handing everything off to a younger, more unsullied citizenry unencumbered by the lies and failures of American triumphalism is a good thing: Thao drives off in the Gran Torino at the end of the movie, and what makes him a positive image is precisely his *difference* from everything WASPY and mainstream, precisely his lack of encumbrance by that narrative of American decline.

The longer the movie goes on, the more inescapable this dark sense of the falseness and the uselessness of everything in the past and the present becomes. Only the moral self-reinvention of the protagonist can put the brakes on this feeling of sinking into an abyss. Once again we must recall that all this is happening to Clint Eastwood, and that he has what is virtually a contractual obligation to impose himself and restore the situation somehow. Historically, Eastwood's audience would just not put up with the spectacle of an Eastwood character dying, as evidenced by the poor box office performances of *The Beguiled* in 1971 and *Honkytonk Man* in 1982—his sole prior

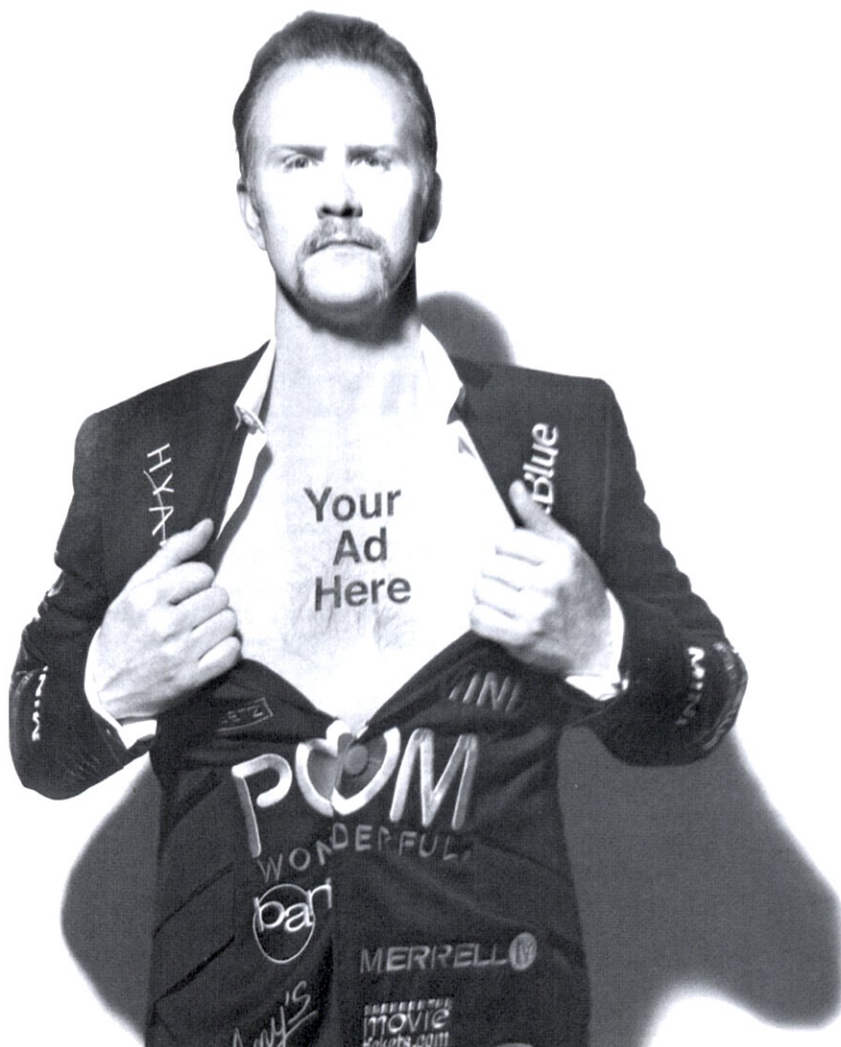
The American Personality DOCUMENTARY

FETISHIZATION, NOSTALGIA AND THE WORKING CLASS

BY CAITLIN STAROWICZ

In 2002, hell froze over when a documentary became one of the highest-grossing films of the year earning over fifty-eight million dollars internationally and becoming the highest-grossing documentary of all time.

Of course, this film was Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), which quickly became an international phenomenon unto itself. Since then, lightning has struck twice. Moore's next film, the 2004 *Fahrenheit 9/11* beat this record by over 600 percent, earning in excess of 222 million dollars. This unpredicted success, in what many thought was a dead cinematic form, was heralded by many as a documentary renaissance; an outpouring of new documentaries saw the light of day, such as Mark



Morgan Spurlock, director of
*Pom Wonderful Presents: The
Greatest Movie Ever Sold*



Michael Moore in *Roger and Me*

Achbar's 2003 film *The Corporation* (2003), Dan Ollman and Chris Smith's *The Yes Men* (2003) also of 2003, Morgan Spurlock's *Super Size Me* (20, released in 2004), Spurlock's 2005 tv series "30 Days", Moore's *Sicko* (2007) and his 2009 film *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009), up until Spurlock's most recent release that opened this April, *Pom Wonderful Presents: The Greatest Movie Ever Sold* (2011).

However, this documentary renaissance seems to have made a detour from the established path of documentary; they all foreground an inordinate amount of focus on the personality of the filmmaker himself, more so than documentaries in the past. Please note that I make reference to "his personality" on purpose because this new slate of documentaries is extremely gendered. Regardless, these films bear a striking incongruity with the documentary doxa of their predecessors.

So where does this documentary renaissance fit within the paradigm of documentary cinema? I would like to put forward the assertion that they represent an entirely new style of documentary. They are divergent from most established ways of interpreting documentary within scholarly discourse. These films mark a new mode within the cultural field, a mode which I will term the "personality documentary".

The personality documentary is marked by an unprecedented focus on the persona of the filmmaker himself where the personality invades the film to the point of becoming a performance which overshadows the content itself. Gone are the days of cinema vérité with the hidden man behind the camera—the

personality documentary is about the man behind, in front of, and all around the camera. This performance of personality becomes a form of masquerade in which the filmmaker plays a specific character for the camera, commenting on socio-political issues. As Michael Chanan puts it in *The Politics of Documentary*, "[t]he films of Nick Broomfield and Michael Moore, as well as titles like *Super Size Me* (2004) and *The Yes Men*, represent a mode of political reportage in which the filmmaker's personality invades the film, which consequently becomes highly performative; the style, which has a strong resonance in the US, is highly gendered but also adopts a satirical and ironic stance."¹

However, it is important to differentiate this form of performance from previous types of documentary. This personality mode of documentary is a relatively new phenomenon which is divergent from performative documentaries where the appearance of the filmmaker on camera is used to illustrate the subjectivity of the mode of representation. For example, when Marlon Riggs appears naked and exposed in *Tongues Untied* (1989) chanting poetry, it is to express his subjective experience as a gay black man. His appearance foregrounds the subjective positioning of his film. Contrast this to Michael Moore's boisterous and baseball cap-wearing personage in his films. Moore serves as a rotund guide and Everyman "telling it like it is." Here, his appearance serves to denote a sense of collectivity rather than subjectivity—Moore's presence is showing what it's like for all John Does across America and *not* the subjective positioning of



Michael Moore in *Bowling for Columbine*

Michael Moore as an individual. Similarly, if we watch *Super Size Me*, Morgan Spurlock stands in for the masses rather than representing the individual. When we see him gaining weight while chowing down on McDonalds, we don't think "Oh, that's what it's like to experience the subjectivity of Morgan Spurlock and experience his metabolism, and I will have a completely different experience." Instead, we think "this is what's happening all across America." In this mode, the personality of one stands for the state of the masses.

This new personality documentary can be seen as an example of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the position-taking characteristic of all fields of cultural production. As Chanan says, "In Bourdieu's account, a cultural field is structured by conflict between different positions within it which present themselves in the shape of antinomies—like Romantic versus Classical, abstract as opposed to realist, or [...] fiction against documentary."² However, these antinomies do not stop at the meta-level as Chanan says, but continue into the types of documentary themselves. In this case, the personality documentary has emerged in opposition to more traditional documentary modes.

These personality documentaries, for the most part, all bear the similarity that they focus on the working class. Despite the fact that they are almost all made by middle class filmmakers, films like *Roger and Me* (1989), *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), *Sicko* (2007), by Michael Moore, Steve James' *Stevie* (2002), and Morgan Spurlock's television show

"30 Days" (2005) and film *Super Size Me* (2004) are all about working-class struggle.

But why did this phenomenon of the personality documentary's focus on working-class life emerge when it did? What is it about the past few decades in the United States that led to the phenomenon of a working-class persona behind the narrative? This increased awareness and enactment of the working-class habitus can perhaps be viewed alongside the socio-economic changes in Western society that have balkanized the classes, exponentially expanding working-class unemployment and forever changing the ideologies that helped form social identity and subjectivity. In "Bourdieu, Social Suffering and Working-Class Life," Simon Charlesworth describes this as "[a] series of economic policies, pursued for political as well as fiscal ends, [which] have actively impoverished the bottom third of our society." He continues, "[d]e-industrialization and new technologies have been used to create conditions of unemployment that have disempowered the working-class."³

This radical shift in the sociological fabric has subsequently caused a major shift in the habitus of the working class and, just as Bourdieu pointed out in *Distinction*, the institutions that cause them are self-perpetuating.⁴ As Martin Marger outlines in *Social Inequality: Patterns and Processes*, the constant ghettoization of the poor in the media and in the social unconscious in general, leads to less exposure to positive role models and less desire to complete education which results in fewer marketable skills, which leads to low-wage jobs and the inability to pay for

housing, food, and medical care. This, in turn, leads to impoverished neighbourhoods and under-funded schools, which leads back to low-quality education. Added to this, the deindustrialization that occurs as the economy shifts from a manufacturing society to an informational technological society means that many blue-collar jobs are either being made obsolete through technology or being outsourced for economic gain.⁵ Marger also points out that as the jobs leave the cities, people are unable to follow them and are left in neighbourhoods without employment or the tax basis to support institutions such as schools and police departments, thus increasing the ghettoization of the working-class.⁶

As these socio-economic changes occurred, there was a simultaneous shift in the study and comprehension of working-class and labour history, which paved the way for the personality documentary's focus on working-class narratives. Starting in the 1960s with British social historian E.P. Thompson, the idea of "history from below" emerged, citing that personal histories of the working class offer "double validity in understanding a past in which, as still today, myth was embedded in real experiences: both growing from it and helping to shape its perception."⁷ As a sociologist in the field of new working-class studies, Tim Strangleman posits that in relating a personal narrative that represents the masses, this "stress on the interrelationship between experience and memory gives us access to the embedding process. Class is both a product and is structured by this embedding process, and class must, therefore, be understood through these narratives of life."⁸ However, it was not until the late 1980s and early 1990s that these issues of "history from below" became influential in the United States. Strangleman points out that:

the British context rehearsed many of the arguments about the validity of both subject matter and method that were being raised in working-class studies during the 1990s and 2000s [in the U.S.]. What is interesting and important about new working-class studies is its rediscovery of these issues at a time when academic debates about class were shifting. Over the last decade, social commentators on the left have tried to make sense of the contemporary world of work, employment, and class.⁹

In many ways, E.P. Thompson's concept of "history from below" was carried over to the United States through the work of David Montgomery who, with Herbert Gutman, is credited with the founding of "new labour history", the study of working-class culture over working-class institutions. It is perhaps more than coincidental that Montgomery's Pulitzer Prize finalist text, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925*, was published in 1988, just a year before Michael Moore's film about labour unions and workers' rights, *Roger and Me*, was released. I do not mean to suggest that the two are ontologically linked, but merely that they are indications that the idea of a concentrated focus on working-class culture was emerging in the late 1980s and continued on into the next decade.

Jeremy Rifkin continued to provoke debate over working-class studies into the mid-nineties with his 1995 book *The End of Work: The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era*. Rifkin predicted the spread of international unemployment where the middle class is continually shrinking

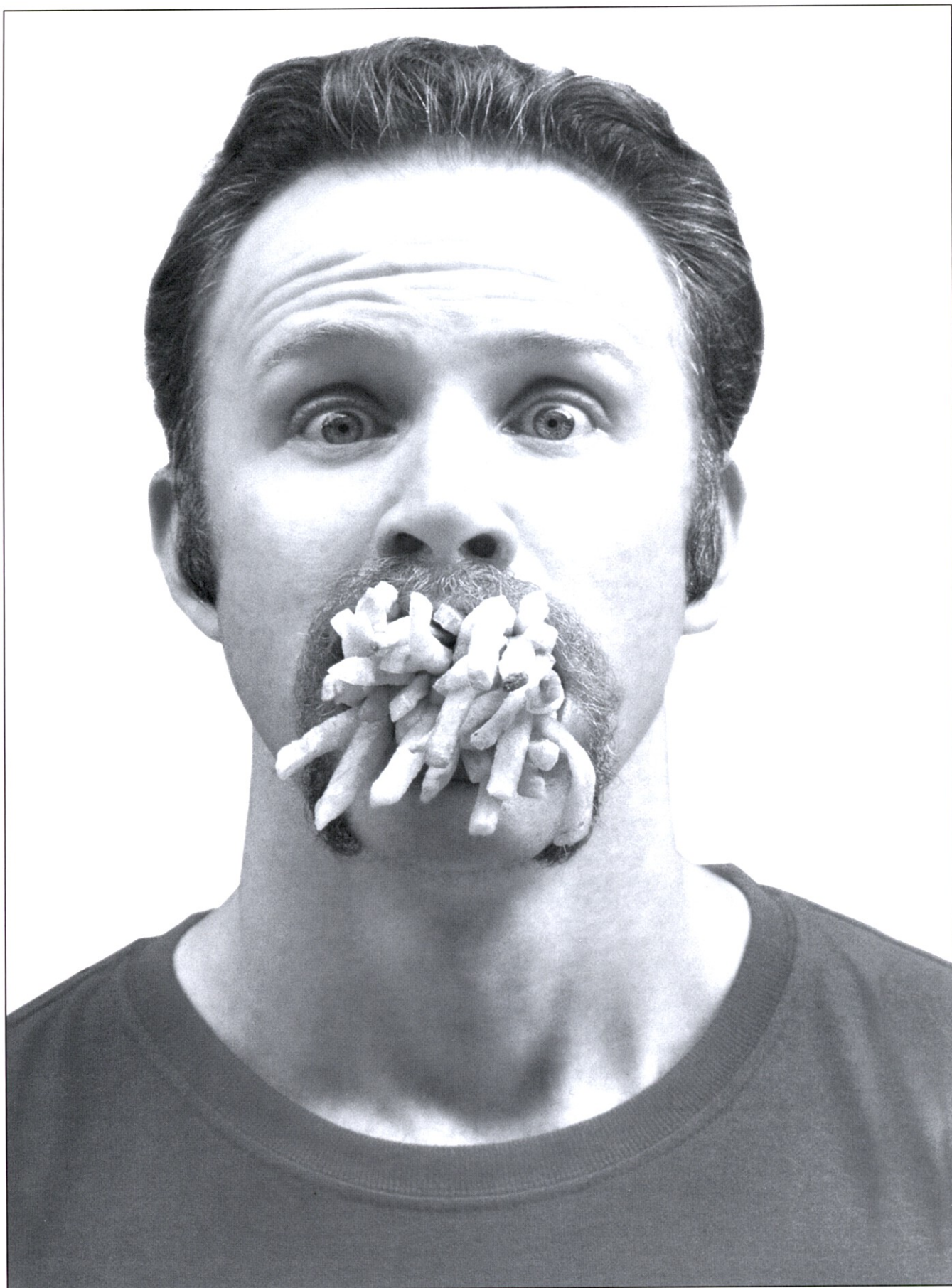
and the difference between the haves and the have-nots is ever increasing. This foreboding message struck fear in the hearts of many and can be linked to a general increase in nostalgia for the past—a longing for the united industrialized working class. In a society where contemporary work has no place for the working class and deprives them of agency, there is an increase in nostalgia for times when this was not so.

In *Work, Consumerism, and the New Poor*, Zygmunt Bauman writes that in the past "work was the main orientation point, in reference to which all other life pursuits could be planned and ordered."¹⁰ He continues, "a steady, durable, and continuous, logically coherent, and tightly structured working career is however no longer a widely available option. Only in relatively rare cases can a permanent identity be defined, let alone secured, through the job performed."¹¹ Similarly, Ulrich Beck sees an acceleration of this process: "[t]he 'job for life' has disappeared [...] Paid employment is becoming precarious; the foundations of the social-welfare state are collapsing; the normal life-stories are breaking up into fragments."¹²

In this fragmentary and uncertain life, the nostalgic glorification of a pre-WWII dignified working class in the personality documentary is particularly appealing. The filmmaker enacts the role of working-class hero who fights to return to the wage-based society of social cohesion, playing upon this nostalgia. For examples of this, one might think of Michael Moore's role in *Roger and Me*, glorifying the workers of the General Motors plant as a generalized and unified group, and vilifying CEO Roger Smith as the lone tyrant. Even the title denotes the idea of class unification: the "Me" being synonymous for the generalized industrial working class, which Moore seeks to represent through the reflexivity of the personality documentary.

Within this mode of the personality documentary I'd like to isolate a particular vein of cultural capital that is used when enacting this nostalgic working-class habitus. When we talk of cultural capital in Bourdieu's traditional sense, we are of course making reference to certain privileges afforded the cultural elite with linguistic, aesthetic, educational and physical capital. In France during the period when Bourdieu was writing *Distinction*, to have a classical education meant that one was endowed with a taste for the canonized arts while having the social capital of powerful group membership, relationships, networks of influence and support within the *haute bourgeoisie* was to be able to appreciate the avant-garde. In either case, to possess such cultural capital was to be one of culture's gatekeepers, permitted to join in the process of classifying and delimiting the artistic world.

If we examine many of the documentary filmmakers of traditional study, we find that they inhabit Bourdieu's classical concept of the artistic habitus. That is to say, they exist as autonomous social and aesthetic critics who use, to quote John Grierson, "the creative treatment of actuality" as their medium. Pare Lorentz, Robert Flaherty, Pierre Perrault and Michael Apted all exhibit the caché of the artist and utilize it as authorial justification in their documentaries. Even Dziga Vertov, socialist comrade though he was, is still positioned as the artist that uses his aesthetic disposition to frame the world around us to create art. The documentary filmmaker is involved in a habitus that denotes artistic privilege. Despite their actual class origins, their position as artist puts them into the class of the intelligentsia. This habitus of the documentary filmmaker created a cinematic form that was governed by a largely unconscious delimitation



Morgan Spurlock in *Super Size Me*

which spread into the rationale and a doxa in the form of craft lore, concretized by Grierson as a social conception. Documentary filmmakers played their preordained roles in the habitus as intelligent aesthetes who bring us the world through their aesthetically privileged eye. Thus, when Pare Lorentz investigates the sufferings of the working class in *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (191936), it is understood as a view of the working class through the eyes of the aesthetically privileged.

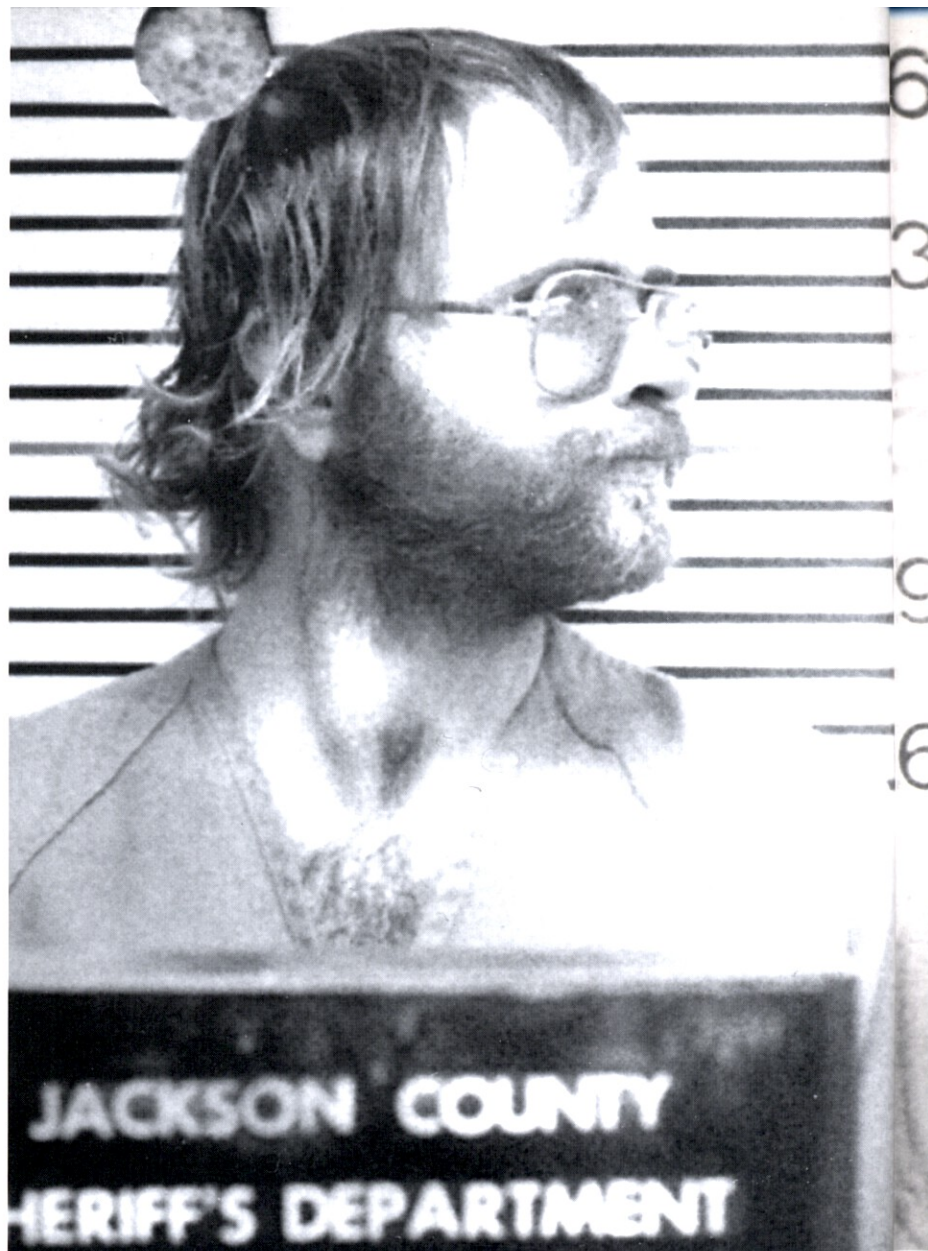
The vein of cultural capital that I would like to juxtapose in the personality documentary is something of an inverse to this classical habitus of the artist. It is the denial of capital, and an adopting of the Average Joe persona. Here, to have cultural capital is negative. To be educated is detrimental. To be set apart as the intelligentsia is to be avoided at all costs. That is to say, in this mode, lack of capital *becomes* capital. To position oneself as Joe Schmoe who is completely unremarkable is to claim a populist capital and this is where the veracity of the documentary is derived. By saying that they are the Everyman, these filmmakers gain authority to speak. In this process, lack of capital is a form of "street cred" that gives status in a populist manner. Just as many found John Edwards "too slick," a certain amount of "folksiness" is often needed to convince the public.

The perfect example of this would be Michael Moore and his performance in the personality documentary where he gains authority from positioning himself as a Flint Michigan, community college dropout. Or, as Rolling Stone puts it, "How a blue-collar screw-up became the White House's nightmare."¹³ But here, it is imperative that we consider the legitimacy of Moore's claim to the habitus of the working class and the audience of his films. Michael Moore's false enactment of the working class persona only serves to fetishize the working class and the collapse of the American dream.

It is important to analyze Moore's position to determine the motives of his reflexivity. As Carl Plantinga puts it in *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film*,

The information Moore gives about himself, despite its being reflexive, is still in need of the same examination to which we might subject nonreflexive information. Why does Moore present himself in the way he does? What rhetorical strategies lie behind his reflexive choices? Neither does the film's reflexivity guarantee a full-bodied examination of General Motors and plant closings in Flint. [...] The point is that reflexivity is always partial, in regard to some aspect of the film's representation, and not in relation to all of the salient possibilities. Reflexivity does not guarantee the representation of the magnitudes and complexities of the world, any more than objectivity guarantee fairness and balance.¹⁴

Firstly, though he does have working class roots, Moore is any-



Stevie

thing but that. Before making his first film, *Roger & Me*, about GM's auto-plant closings in his hometown, Moore had founded his own magazine, expanded his business statewide, and finally become the editor-in-chief of *Mother Jones*, the highly-awarded, politically progressive magazine known for its investigative journalism. With a paid circulation of 233,000, *Mother Jones* is the most widely read progressive publication in the United States. One can hardly say that this does not bring cultural recognition. When Moore was fired from the position shortly thereafter, he sued the magazine for two million dollars, and ended up with a hefty out-of-court settlement. His stint at *Mother Jones* not only brought cultural recognition (if not notoriety) and his settlement brought him monetary capital. I don't begrudge Moore this, but this is hardly the position of the Everyman.

What is to be taken to task is Moore's appropriation of the habitus of the working class and his enactment of the doxa as a performance of personality. Moore has created the false persona of the hick town Average Joe and completely appropriated the working class doxa.

Moore continually tells the public that he "hates documen-



watching the sunset and checking how well your portfolio did today? [...] And who gives a rat's ass if, out of the seventy English Literature programs at seventy major American universities, only twenty-three now require English majors to take a course in Shakespeare? Can somebody please explain to me what Shakespeare and English have to do with each other? What good are some moldy old plays going to be in the business world, anyway? Maybe I'm just jealous because I don't have a college degree. Yes, I Michael Moore, am a college dropout.¹⁶

Moore's sarcastic bashing of prestigious, Ivy League schools and business people in favour of his lack of education is only compounded by his careful choice of the colloquialism "rat's ass". This is all a carefully crafted persona of the Everyman which Moore enacts to gain the capital of "street cred" masking his real social and economic relations.

Here, Moore plays the Average Joe despite his real habitus. Or, as Daniel Radosh in a *Salon* article rather strongly put it "a self-promoting egomaniac who humiliated people on camera, treated his own employees badly, and flaunted working-class values while living in a million-dollar Upper West Side Manhattan apartment."¹⁷ Despite his actual cultural capital, Moore would describe his experience in his 2002 book *Adventures in a TV Nation* thusly: "Our intent was to finish [*Roger & Me*], hop in a car, and drive around the country showing it in union halls, community centers, and church groups. We silk-screened some T-shirts and took them to sell at our first film

festival so we could afford the trip back home."¹⁸ Moore's performance of the working class is a fetishization on film. In this case, "[a] reflexive film can be as manipulative as any other. Reflexive films reveal aspects of the film's methodology and perspective, but nothing guarantees that the revelations of the filmmaker are either presented in good faith or from a position of genuine self-knowledge."¹⁹

In addition to the legitimacy of his habitus, we must examine the audience of Moore's films. Moore projects an idea that his films are by a working man, for the working man, but the fact remains that his audience is largely composed of the upper middle class and the intelligentsia. Documentaries are still not the fodder of the typical janitor coming home after a long day of manual labour or the single-mom struggling to support her three kids. Yet, Moore continually paints it as such.

For example, in the extra features on his latest DVD, *Sicko*, one can find a clip entitled "A Different Kind of Premiere". In this clip, Moore presents his film *alfresco* in Skid Row, shouting through a loudspeaker that "this is the real premiere of my film!"

Moore paints his audience to be the downtrodden and

tary and PBS," and puts on an act of indifference. As a long-time investigative journalist, it seems unlikely that he would abhor the cinematic and television equivalent of social investigation. Similarly, Moore is continually clad in jeans, a t-shirt and a baseball cap, symbolic of lack of economic capital. Though he is, by now, a very wealthy man he enacts symbolic social limits that are not there by painting himself as "the scruffy guy in a baseball hat."¹⁵ Moore also speaks in a "down-home" colloquial manner, in an attempt to put on his working-class persona. Take, for example, this excerpt from his 2004 book

Stupid White Men: ...And Other Sorry Excuses for the State of the Nation:

Yale, Harvard, Princeton and Dartmouth. Stanford and Berkeley. Get a degree from one of those universities, and you're set for life. So what if, on that test of the college seniors I previously mentioned, 70 percent of the students at those fine schools had never heard of the Voting Rights Act or President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society initiatives? Who needs to know stuff like that as you sit in your Tuscan villa

racially segregated poor of Skid Row who suddenly come together in harmony, weeping at the sight of his film. In actuality, his audience is more closely related to the red carpet event that was at the beginning of the clip. Moore's documentaries tend to be geared toward a middle-class audience and this is their primary market. However, the fact that Moore feels he needs to include this clip in his DVD speaks to the false marketing of his films as aimed toward the common man. It's almost as if he needs it as a token to prove his fictional audience.

Documentary filmmaker Mitchell W. Block elaborates: "If *Roger and Me* (1989) were a fiction, with actors instead of real people, it would be fine. Alas, Moore is a documentary liar; his work holds up its subjects for ridicule and scorn."²⁰ Moore, in his false performance of the Average Joe is enacting a fetishized version of the working class to an upper class audience. He puts on the mask of the hayseed and enacts the lower-class experience for the enjoyment and indulgence of the privileged.

Just as Sophie Tucker performed in blackface, so does Michael Moore perform as the working class for a privileged audience fetishizing the collapse of the American Dream for the haves while exploiting the have-nots.

But why is this so? What is the allure of this trauma? Here, the collapse of the American dream becomes a Bakhtinian spectacle, the carnivalesque where one can indulge in the working class experience from a safe distance while objectifying them through Moore's performance.

In this sense, perhaps the most biting evidence is that Moore won both at Cannes and at the Oscars—the two biggest spectacles of the elite in the Western world. *Bowling for Columbine* won the 55th Anniversary Prize at Cannes and the Oscar for Best Documentary and *Fahrenheit 9/11* won the Palme d'Or at Cannes. Perhaps this is overly cynical, but what in contemporary filmmaking is more indicative of fetishized forays into the world of the under-privileged than an Academy Award for documentary—where the artistic and social elite pick the most deserving film that depicts the underprivileged?

I don't mean to suggest that the privileged can never make a successful and unfetishized film about the underprivileged. The corpus of documentary film is an overwhelming indication to the contrary. But within this new form of the personal-ity documentary, Michael Moore's enactment of the working class habitus sticks out as an exploitative and demeaning appropriation.

Similar to Moore in his on-camera persona, Morgan Spurlock at least admits his own cultural capital but, in many ways, still fetishizes the working class. In his 2005 series "30 Days", Spurlock attempts to live for thirty days on minimum wage. To his credit, Spurlock admits that he and his fiancée, Alex, have been living extremely well since his film *Super Size Me* was nominated for an Academy Award. However, Spurlock ghettoizes and oversimplifies the working class, infantilizing them from his upper-middle class perspective. The couple move to Columbus Ohio, claiming that it "represents the state of affairs all over the United States" in that "the city has lost over 250,000 jobs over the last four years alone." This is an extreme oversimplification—one city cannot become metonymic for the entire working class of a nation. The episode then proceeds to only show the negative sides of working-class life, such as when they rent an apartment in a neighbourhood affectionately known as "the bottoms" which is indicated on a map with a superimposed skull-and-crossbones. This is taken even further when the landlord tells them that two days earlier,

a homeless man had been living there illegally, and there is a crack house below them. By choosing only to show the down-trodden and defeated without any positive representation, Spurlock stigmatizes the working class and perpetuates the idea of their inferiority in the public unconscious.

Spurlock is enacting stigmatization of the poor that Bourdieu identifies in his work *On Television*. Bourdieu posits that television is the main source of information for most people, and thus when the media collectively forms a habitus of sensationalism surrounding the lower class, it becomes ingrained into the social fabric as a reflection of society, despite its fabrication.²¹ Expanding upon Bourdieu's theses, Philippe Marlière continues:

Television does not encapsulate reality in the sense it tends to "dramatize", transforming a minor event into a "sensational" or "spectacular" phenomenon. For instance, when television journalists report on areas around big cities, [...] the media tend to create an image of social problems for the public consumption which emphasizes the "extraordinary", that is violent actions, fights between youngsters and the police, acts of vandalism, juvenile delinquency, the over-concentration of immigrant populations, etc. Media portrayal of these suburban areas "stigmatizes" the people living there in all aspects of their everyday lives, thereby extending the "bad reputation" of a place to its inhabitants.²²

In this way, Spurlock stigmatizes the working class as hapless and helpless to his largely middle-class audience.

Furthermore, the nostalgia for the united industrialized working class found in Moore's films is also present here. Spurlock interviews a man named Gerald who states that "I'm making less money than I did at my first job 29 years ago. They call this prosperity, I call it slavery. They say they can't pay me as much as the big auto companies, but at least pay me what you would have a quarter-of-a-century ago!"

Upon completing the thirty days, Spurlock infantilizes the working class in a direct address to camera, saying "I've seen how hard the struggle is, and I've only done this for a month, and there's people who do this for their whole lives. You will be changed, you will walk out a different person. I'm a different person. I've been affected and I'm better for it," continuing "I had never been in the position of denying myself before, and it was really hard." Though the sentiment may be rooted in sincerity, the fact that Spurlock returns to his Manhattan apartment with only a fond memory of "those poor working-class people" whom he has just represented to the nation as being entirely without hope or happiness in their lives, smacks of condescension and sensationalism.

Though Morgan Spurlock at least acknowledges his class privilege, unlike Michael Moore, the counter-productive nostalgia for a dignified working class of a bygone era is just as present.

However, an interesting case to examine is Spurlock's most recent film *Pom Wonderful Presents: The Greatest Movie Ever Sold*. The film's self-referential and inwardly gazing *mise-en-abyme* structure creates an interesting layer of seeming transparency that gives the viewer insight into the actual making of the film itself. However, could this be just an illusion to mask the working class masquerade that is actually being enacted?

Spurlock opens the film posing himself as the Average Joe

who is completely naïve to the intricacies of marketing and branding in film. When he solicits the advice of a marketing firm, he acts completely unawares to the idea of his own branding, despite the fact that he is one of the most recognizable brands in documentary filmmaking. Everyone knows him as that puckish prankster who took on McDonalds with a tongue-in-cheek glee. When the firm describes the Spurlock brand as "Mindful/Playful," he acts as if this psychobabble is far too much for him, the Everyman. Yet, when interviewing passersby on the street, none of them have any trouble describing their own brand.

Spurlock goes on to present himself as the Average Joe when interviewed by the Hollywood Reporter when he states that the hardest part of the film was "Just getting people to agree to want to be a part of it. There were countless people that we spoke to along the way that were like, 'The last thing we would ever do is put someone like you on a billboard. There's no way we would put an Average Joe like you in any of our ads.'"

One would hardly consider an Academy Award-nominated, Emmy nominated, Writer's Guild of America and Sundance-winning director an "Average Joe." While Spurlock makes all attempts to show transparency in the marketing process, he fails to give any transparency into his own cultural bias, fetishizing the working class by trading on the cultural capital of the Average Joe to gain credibility in his documentary.

A counter-example to this fetishization of the working class through the masking of actual social class would be Steve James' 2002 film, *Stevie*. A compelling film about James' relationship with Stevie, a disturbed repeat offender living below the poverty line, the class differences are palpable and deliberately made explicit. James makes no claims to working-class cred as Moore does, nor does he situate himself as superior for his middle-class status as Spurlock does. In this film James very plainly tables his bias and never denies his middle-class capital. In fact, James quite bravely states at the beginning of the film that, "when I left [Illinois], I felt a sense of relief that I didn't have to go do those weekly visits to be [Stevie's] Big Brother, but in my journal, I wrote that I should never abandon him, that I should be there for him constantly, and of course I haven't been since then." James unabashedly reveals how uncomfortable the class differences are, while still showing the humanity and giving some dignity to those whom he profiles in the film. In fact, one of the most revealing scenes in the film is where James refuses to post Stevie's bail bond from prison for ethical reasons. When James asks Stevie's grandmother what she thinks of this, she states that she assumes it is because James has three children and a home, and simply can't afford the \$100 bond. At this point, James plainly, but not insultingly, tells her that he *can* afford the bail, but he did not give Stevie the money due to the fact that he believes him guilty and that he should not be released on bail, lest he harm someone else. The scene is fraught with tension, and this honesty is far more compelling than any of Moore's fetishized re-enactments or Spurlock's condescension.

The personality documentary has become a force to be reckoned with in the documentary renaissance. However, its focus on the working class as a result of socio-economic upheavals of its time must be taken with a grain of salt lest fetishized enactments like those of Michael Moore occur. Furthermore, the nostalgia for a united industrialized working class becomes detrimental to the forming of subjectivities. Some, like André Gorz maintain that this utopian image is just that, and nothing more:

Even in the heyday of wage-based society, that work [modern work] was never a source of "social cohesion" or integration, whatever we might have come to believe from its retrospective idealization. The "social bond" it established between individuals was abstract and weak, though it did, admittedly, insert people into the process of social labour, into social relations of production, as functionally specialized cogs in an immense machine.²³

By wistfully creating a romanticized view of the past, Moore and Spurlock both infantilize and fetishize the working class, and perpetuate Bourdieu's idea that the media can stigmatize an entire class to themselves and to those around them.

For the personality documentary to survive as a valid representation of society and viable cinematic language, class biases must be tabled and made explicit.

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Notes

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Impalement

RACE AND GENDER IN BRYAN SINGER'S *X-MEN*

BY HEATHER J. HICKS

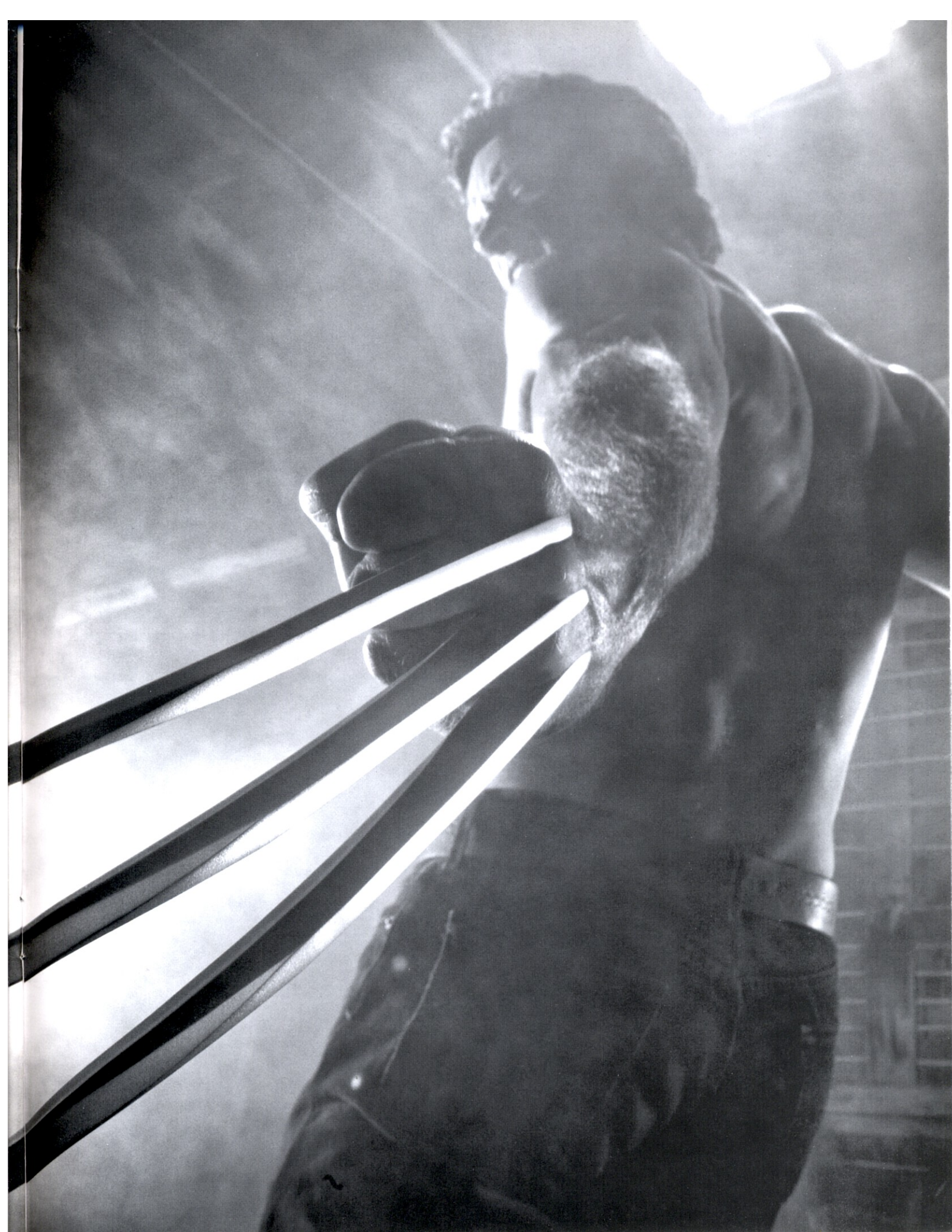
Why does the political content of a comic book movie matter? The responses to *X-Men* (Bryan Singer, 2000) that have been posted by viewers on the popular website, Internet Movie Database (IMDB), underscore that many young comic book fans are deeply invested in the principles that comics extol. They rely on these narratives to enact models of selflessness and heroism that they can, however modestly, emulate in their own lives.¹ Over 1,300 viewer comments have been posted since the film was first released, and this passionate response is largely fueled by loyalty to the *X-Men* comics. In a sample of one hundred recent viewer comments, thirty-one demonstrate knowledge of the comics, cartoons, and video games or specifically mention that they are fans of *X-Men*.

Among those who attempt to explain their enthusiasm for the *X-Men* comics, several stress their sense of the humanity of its narrative. An American viewer writes, "X-Men is about family through friendship, loyalty, betrayal, being an outcast and finding your place, death, overcoming, sorrow [*sic*], happiness, anger, bitterness, love, and how our experiences shape us. It is about human beings." This sense of the power of the *X-Men* story is often associated with what viewers perceive to be its political theme of embracing diversity. A viewer from Australia writes, "I think that my attraction to 'X-Men' lay in the comic's story.... The story was about acceptance of all people, regardless of race, religion, social class etc." For many viewers it is the extension of this political message from page to screen that inclines them favorably toward the film.

Yet even among those who do not identify themselves as fans of the comic book, many explicitly respond to the film's vision regarding prejudice. Overall, fifteen percent of the responses specifically understand the film to celebrate the idea of social tolerance. Some, however, perceive contradictions in the narrative regarding race. One viewer from England challenges the film's "propaganda" and "politically correct doctrine". The viewer writes, "The mutants are going to replace us? And I am supposed to be happy about this, to cheer for them? Forget it." A second viewer from the U.S. muses that, while Senator Kelly, the arch-enemy of the mutants, is meant to be understood as wrong-minded, viewers of the film are also "clearly supposed to feel sympathy for Kelly after he is tortured and killed by them."

Wolverine/Hugh Jackman





While these comments register ambivalence in the film's message about race, equally striking is the absence of any significant commentary about gender. In her recent study of contemporary Hollywood film, Sharon Willis asserts, "If cultural studies wants to continue privileging ambivalence and negotiation, we need to be specific about what is being negotiated and what is presented as not up for negotiation, as having been already negotiated."² I will argue that in *X-Men* gender is the form of difference that is "presented as not up for negotiation," and it is the construction of gendered identity that becomes pivotal to its ambivalent treatment of race. Despite its superficial gestures toward tolerance, the film recoils from any significant embrace of racial difference by deploying a Freudian narrative of masculine subject formation—a narrative so commonplace and seamless as to be invisible to most viewers. It is ultimately this conventional narrative of masculine empowerment that secures the protagonist within a symbolic order associated with heterosexuality and racial assimilation.

Malcolm X-Men?

As many of the viewers' comments suggest, *X-Men* can be understood to privilege mutual understanding and tolerance over hatred and bigotry. Such politics are evident in the film's repeated portraits of the pain and loneliness that those categorized as "different" suffer—images ranging from the alienation Rogue/Anna Paquin suffers as a runaway, to the plaintive explanation Storm/Halle Berry offers to Senator Kelly that she sometimes hates humans because she is afraid of them, to the angry lament of Mystique/Rebecca Romijn-Stamos to the same senator that, "It's people like you who made me afraid to go to



Jean Grey/Famke Janssen
Toad/Ray Park



school as a child.”³ By powerfully giving voice to sentiments that the current social formation produces in those on its margins, the film appears to be a call for multicultural openness and trust.

Yet a closer inspection of the film’s central narrative regarding evolution suggests that it has not strayed far from the racist thinking of the early 20th century that was predicated on Darwinism. At the very moment that biological theories of race are being discredited by mainstream science, *X-Men* presents its mutant protagonists as a minority that has experienced accelerated evolution. Although the mutants are in theory all equally biologically removed from—and persecuted by—humans, some of these mutants are far closer to humans than others, and it is these human-appearing mutants with whom the film repeatedly encourages the audience to identify. The ‘good’ mutants, those allied with Charles Xavier/Patrick Stewart and known as the X-Men, have superpowers involving their minds—Xavier and Dr. Jean Grey/Famke Janssen are telepathic and telekinetic respectively, Storm can control the weather through concentration, and even Cyclops/James Marsden, the ‘good’ mutant whose mutation seems the most unrefined, uses his eyes, a body part associated with consciousness and knowledge, as a weapon. This association with mental power is most graphically emblemized by Xavier’s “secret weapon,” “Cerebro,” a chamber that allows him to psychically survey the world’s mutant population at a glance. The ‘bad’ mutants who are teamed with Magneto/Ian McKellen, on the other hand, appear to have devolved rather than evolved. With their direct associations with animals, the chameleon Mystique, the Toad/Ray Park, and the feline Sabretooth/Tyler Mane all seem to be evolutionary throwbacks.⁴ If we read humans as figures for whiteness within the racial metaphors of the film, it becomes evident that the film’s mechanisms of identification are not as aligned with minority groups as they might at first appear.

The film’s treatment of race is further complicated by its references to Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. The alignment of the two mutant camps with these black leaders equates all of the mutants with racial minority populations, even as the evolutionary sub-plot encourages audience identification with the white mainstream. This layering of the discourses of Civil Rights history and evolution suggests that the film is less concerned with the possession of power than its acquisition. That is, while the film’s portrait of persecuted mutants can be interpreted superficially as a response to contemporary social conflicts that have left a variety of minority groups in conditions of deprivation, by linking the mutants with the struggle for power enacted through the Civil Rights movement and simultaneously celebrating whiteness through its evolutionary narrative, it reframes minority groups as oppressors in the making.

Any progressive effects that might be achieved through evoking King and X are undercut from the outset by the reductive terms in which each figure is characterized.⁵ Rather than concerning itself with the complexities of each man’s political vision, the film references the popular mythology of the two figures that prevails within mainstream white culture. The most salient alignment of Magneto with Malcolm X, then, comes at the conclusion of the film, when Magneto renews his oft-repeated assertion to Xavier that there is a war coming between the humans and the mutants, and this time adds that he intends to win the war “by whatever means necessary,” a direct reference to one of Malcolm X’s most notorious statements. Other allusions to X highlight the most militant aspects of his

mystique, including his purported dislike and contempt for whites. We can hear in Magneto’s pronouncement that “We are the future ..., not them,” echoes of controversial comments attributed to Malcolm X that it was blacks, not whites, who were the superior race.

Meanwhile, Xavier is consistently positioned as a passionate advocate of peace in terms that are unmistakably evocative of popular understandings of Martin Luther King, Jr. While Magneto expresses his distrust of humans, Xavier implores him to hold onto “hope”, a tag word with which Xavier is consistently associated throughout the film that appears to be an updating of King’s well-known reliance on terms like “faith” and “dream.” Xavier’s unwillingness to capitulate to a violent exchange with humans is staged most powerfully in a scene midway through the film in which he permits one of his mutant wards, Rogue/Anna Paquin, to be abducted by Magneto’s forces, rather than allow Magneto to kill a police officer. With its image of a massed police force and Xavier’s unwillingness to risk lives, the scene is strongly reminiscent of King’s famous choice to turn back from his 1965 march across the Pettus Bridge from Selma to Birmingham.

Singer’s deployment of these parallels could be understood simply as faithfulness to the original comics, which, when they were first published in the 1960s, seemed a clear response to the tumult of the Civil Rights Movement.⁶ Nevertheless, Singer could have downplayed rather than underscored such connections in the film, and it is most useful here to think about how his choice relates to the larger ideological position *X-Men* takes on race. Specifically, if we accept that the film presents the mutants as a minority on the rise, what can the deployment of these political figures tell us about how the film depicts this historical shift?

In his discussion of black cinema in the 1980s, Ed Guerrero criticizes *A Soldier’s Story* (Norman Jewison, 1984) for attempting to “fragment black social unity by polarizing the beliefs of Dr. King and Malcolm X.” Guerrero then lauds Spike Lee for ending *Do the Right Thing* (1989) with a photo of King and X shaking hands. Guerrero explains, “Lee’s point here is that the survival of African Americans in the contemporary situation will depend on grasping and synthesizing the political and strategic truths of Martin and Malcolm.”⁷ Like Jewison’s film, *X-Men* simplistically polarizes the views of King and X, providing viewers with a stacked deck and the limited imaginative possibilities of assimilation or militant racial supremacism as solutions to the conflict concerning difference it presents.

The film saliently suggests the potential consequences of Magneto’s political position in the scene that immediately follows Xavier and Magneto’s first conversation, in which Xavier characterizes mutants as “the future”. This remark becomes part of an erotic sequence, in which Magneto’s gesture toward the future is answered in the next scene. Rogue arrives in Loughton City in Alberta, Canada and reluctantly enters its only establishment, a massive, crude frontier-style bar. The dark, murky atmosphere, primitive lighting system of fires in oil barrels, and central cage call to mind images from a series of futuristic science fiction films including *Mad Max* (1979) and *Blade Runner* (1982). The future Magneto’s philosophy promises to bring is implicitly revealed in this scene, as his language of war is echoed in an image of fierce, direct conflict between mutants and humans. In his cage, where he is prizefighting against all takers, Wolverine/Hugh Jackman destroys one assailant after another, as the soundtrack accentuates the metal-



Storm/Halle Berry
Cyclops/James Marsden



lic sounds his reinforced body makes as he wields it against his (comparatively frail) human opponents. The most powerful and lingering image of this scene comes when Wolverine, having been beaten to the floor by an especially brawny opponent, lurches to his feet, and, as the enormous human swings at him again, meets the man's fist with his own. The image of the two fists meeting is a visceral emblem of unyielding and devastating collision, in which the human's hand is agonizingly crushed. With its dystopian setting and lop-sided battles, this scene seems to posit an option that the remainder of the film recoils from: namely, a direct conflict between mainstream white society and a devastatingly powerful "other".⁸

In place of such fearsome carnage, the film offers up Xavier's relationship to difference. While in theory the film's association between King and Xavier suggests a progressive model of peaceful political activism, in practice Xavier seems to promote a program of assimilation into the status quo. In effect, the film associates Xavier's politics with "the good life": While Magneto's accommodations in the film are markedly down-scale (he lives in a cave), Xavier luxuriates in lush Westchester County. Far from King's engagement with impoverished urban communities, the school where Xavier lives and over which he presides has a decidedly neo-colonial feel—all lustrous mahogany, rich carpets, and expanses of impeccable lawn. While Magneto and his team must perennially steal their means of transportation, be it helicopter or boat, Xavier's X-Men have all manner of expensive vehicles, from jet-propelled motorcycles to a private jet.

Yet it is what the school teaches that most aligns Xavier with a model of assimilation. This agenda is clearest in the scene in which Xavier describes the function of the school he runs for mutant children. He explains to Wolverine:

Anonymity is a mutant's first defense against the world's hostility. To the public we're merely a school for gifted youngsters. Cyclops, Storm, and Jean were some of my first students. I protected them, taught them how to control their powers, and, in time, to teach others to do the same.

In response to Wolverine's question about Rogue's fate, Xavier explains, "[She may] rejoin the world as an educated young woman or stay on to teach others to become what the children have affectionately called 'X-Men'." Given the unmistakable black leather ensembles the X-Men don when heroics are called for, it would be an overstatement to say that Xavier's school trains the mutants how to pass as "normal" humans. Yet the image of Rogue's re-entry into the world as an "educated young woman", implies a future existence in which her difference is minimized in the interest of maintaining the current social order.

It is curious, given the schematic I have just presented, that it is Xavier's "team" rather than Magneto's that is referred to as the "X-Men". In some sense, however, reappropriating the letter "X" by associating it with Xavier rather than Malcolm X is consistent with the film's overall disavowal of X's political vision. It is also noteworthy that, given Xavier's team consists of both men and women, they are referred to as the X-Men. The latter anomaly can be written off as a matter of style—"X-People" hardly trips off the tongue—or explained as a consequence of continuity between the original comic book and the film adaptation. In the case of Singer's film, however, I now want to sug-

gest the way this masculinized moniker signals the fundamental assumptions about gendered identity that underwrite the narrative as a whole.

"It's an Impalement Fest"

If *X-Men* posits its question about difference as an either/or choice between militant violence and assimilation, it does not leave that question unanswered. Instead, the film answers the question it poses through both its negative portrait of Magneto and its focus on the development of its hero, Wolverine. Importantly, Singer's film maps the latter narrative onto a familiar oedipal structure that is rendered in similarly dichotomous terms. In so doing, it enlists a conservative narrative of gender construction and (hetero)sexuality in order to shore up its assimilationist racial agenda.

Such a reading unequivocally positions *X-Men* as a classical Hollywood film. Following David Bordwell, Elsaesser and Buckland describe "the double plot-line in the classical Hollywood film, the adventure and the romance plot," and go on to explain that "the terms of narrative closure depend...on the way these two plot-lines are intertwined, cross each other, and become the conditions for each other's resolution."⁹ They then extend this understanding of the adventure plot and the romance plot, suggesting, "If we wanted to give this interaction a psychoanalytic turn, we could distinguish between the 'rational agent logic' and 'the logic of desire'."¹⁰ In such a schema, Magneto's plot to take over the world and the X-Men's bid to stop him provide the rational/adventure half of the structure, while Wolverine's personal development can be understood as the romance plot underwritten by a logic of desire. As a classical Hollywood film unfolds, "A substitution of one set of problems ... for another...allows the film's narrative to engineer a trade-off between rational action logic and the logic of desire/anxiety whose exact working remains hidden and unconscious to both the hero and the audience."¹¹ Such a tradeoff or displacement is precisely what takes place between the racial/political narrative of *X-Men* and the oedipal/personal story of its main character. And as in the film Elsaesser and Buckland analyze, "The skill of the film (or its 'ideological work') is to balance these two kinds of logic by melding them into a single, emotionally acceptable, and narratively plausible story. What appears as natural and self-evident to an audience focused on action and suspense could also be seen as a dubious ideological manoeuvre to reassert the values of patriarchy and (white) supremacy."¹²

Once the film has established the conflict between Xavier and Magneto concerning how the crisis within their community should be resolved, it turns to its central character and the drama that surrounds him: Will Wolverine be enlisted by Magneto in a battle against humans, or will he join the X-Men and work on behalf of Xavier's vision of peace and accord? Clearly, his initial introduction on screen, where he is shown in the pitched battle with a string of opponents that I described above, establishes his capacity to position himself in antagonistic relation to humans. In the broader allegorical structure of the film, the struggle for Wolverine's loyalty encodes the question of whether he will embrace a confrontational model of difference or adopt the assimilationist rhetoric of Xavier.

Wolverine's potential affiliation with Magneto is not telegraphed exclusively through his initial (literally) combative relation with humans.¹³ It is also the nature of his mutation that suggests a likely source of alignment with Magneto's "team".

With his heightened sense of smell, sight and hearing, as well as his hirsute face and claws, he is indisputably more readily identifiable with Magneto's (retrograde) team than Xavier's. We also learn early in the film that in addition to a genetic mutation that gives him "uncharted regenerative capability", Wolverine's entire skeleton has been grafted with an indestructible alloy and augmented with retractable metal claws. While it is unclear throughout *X-Men* whether Wolverine submitted voluntarily to the procedure or not, he has been deeply traumatized by the radically invasive surgery that has left him marked as doubly different from "normal" humans. He suffers from amnesia in regard to how he came to be constructed in this fashion, and his profound trauma is dramatized by his vivid nightmares of the surgery. When the X-Men discover the extent of the modifications, Xavier despairingly suggests that Wolverine has been subjected to "experimentation" because of his genetic mutation, implicitly invoking the eugenicist experiments which Jews suffered at the hands of the Nazis. These images of victimization take on further resonance when Magneto, having acquired Wolverine's dogtags from Sabretooth, places one of the tags against his arm so that Wolverine's serial number rests next to his tattoo from the concentration camp where he was interred. This gesture again implies that Wolverine has been marked as other by a human system that has tortured him and experimented recklessly on his body.

These tangled identifications signal the complexity of Wolverine's character in *X-Men*, for even as both his animal-like mutations and victimized status identify him with Magneto's racialized cohorts, he is also unmistakably of white racial origin. It is in the latter terms that Wolverine's character can be read in relation to contemporary action films more generally. In recent years, a number of critics have identified a trend within these films in which white male protagonists masochistically submit to extreme forms of bodily abuse. According to Yvonne Tasker:

The trajectory of tragic suffering is at its most extreme when enacted through the figure of the white male hero of recent Western action movies. While the black protagonists of these films, who usually act as partners to the white hero, are often damaged in some way, this seems to render them symbolically safe. By way of contrast, these same Western movies seem to need obsessively to cut up and punish the body of the white male hero, a body that they, not coincidentally, also offer up as sexual spectacle. In *Cyborg* (1989) the hero... is described as a "walking wound". This phrase comes close to encapsulating the role of the white male hero in the contemporary action movie. He is both massively damaged and yet still functioning. It also indicates the potential purchase of a psychoanalytic discourse in understanding the complex ways in which figures of power and powerlessness are written over the body of a hero who is represented as both invincible and castrated.¹⁴

The model of simultaneous eroticized heroism and abject castration that Tasker describes is certainly in play in the presentation of Wolverine. Yet I would argue that given Wolverine's visible markings as both white and mutant, he figures as *both* the masochistic white male action hero *and* the wounded black sidekick, bound up into one gothic package. This combination of significations is evident in the scene that introduces him. As

that scene unfolds, we follow Rogue's point of view through the smoky interior of the Loughton City bar toward the sounds of a roaring crowd. As Rogue approaches the cage at the center of the enormous space, she sees a body being carried from it. The camera then follows her gaze to Wolverine, as he stands with his back to her, leaning into the corner of the cage, naked to the waist and wearing tight jeans. His caged condition emphasizes his mutant/minority status, while his exposed torso telegraphs his eroticized white masculinity. This proves to be the first of several extended scenes where Wolverine's sculpted upper body is on display, a fact that is ironized later when Wolverine remarks to Dr. Jean Grey, "Couldn't wait to get my shirt off again, could you?" Throughout the film, that same body is subjected to profound degradation and violence. In this opening scene, Wolverine rallies only after being severely beaten by a huge opponent. Subsequently, he will be pummeled by Sabretooth, Magneto, and Mystique, all of whom exact significant damages before his body regenerates.

Yet it is Tasker's final terms of castration and invincibility that most effectively characterize Wolverine. Wolverine's castration takes the form not only of the recurrent beatings he receives from other mutants, but also the traumatic violation of his body by the surgeons (represented as literal penetration in his nightmares of scalpels and needles) and the social marginalization he experiences because of his mutant status. Even as Wolverine suffers these assaults he also enjoys a supreme form of invincibility because of the regenerative aspect of his mutation and the indestructible metal that suffuses his body.

Wolverine's "castration" itself is far from a simple matter, however, for what is most striking about the augmentations that Wolverine has received is their phallic connotations. His nine-inch claws, which emerge from his knuckles, leave Wolverine a walking figure for penetration. *X-Men* Screenwriter David Hayter accentuates this aspect of Wolverine's character in his explanation of the evolution of Wolverine's role in the script:

In the first *X-Men* movie, early drafts of the script had Wolverine cutting ropes or cutting his way through a door—basically, using his claws as all-purpose scissors. I was like, 'Your hero is a killer at heart, with nine-inch blades that come out of his fists. He's gotta stab somebody.' Of course, in a PG-13 movie they didn't want to do that. We said, 'There are ways to do it where the audience will not freak out. You can still retain sympathy for Wolverine, but it can still be brutal and hard-hitting.' ...[So] Rogue gets it through the shoulder, Mystique gets it through the stomach, Sabretooth gets it in his stomach. It's an impalement fest.¹⁵

The inevitability of this "impalement fest" for the film's writer suggests the degree to which Wolverine is an emblem of penetration. Similarly, the very hardness of his metal-infused body represents not only invincibility but masculine virility.

If Tasker hints at the possible insights a psychoanalytic reading could bring to the action films she describes, a number of other critics have undertaken that psychoanalytic project, focusing particularly on the ways the apparent masochism of these contemporary action figures can be understood as a reassertion of masculinity. In his reading of the action films of Clint Eastwood, Paul Smith identifies an "orthodox structuring code" in the Eastwood films directed by Don Siegel, in which Eastwood's body moves from "eroticization, through destruc-

tion, to reemergence and regeneration."¹⁶ Drawing a parallel between *X-Men* and Eastwood's films seems particularly appropriate given that John Byrne, the artist responsible for illustrating the *X-Men* comic book in the 1970s and 1980s, described Wolverine as "'Dirty Harry' with a Canadian accent."¹⁷ Certainly, Smith's code is evident in *X-Men*, where Wolverine's body enjoys an initial and recurring presentation as classically beautiful, is then assaulted by a series of opponents, and, by the conclusion, is shown restored to perfection in a scene in which Dr. Jean Grey inspects it, searching futilely for any scar from the abuse it has suffered.

Taking issue with psychoanalytic theorists who have identified masochism as a mode of resistance to patriarchal culture, Smith argues that the "two-stage exhibitionist/masochistic process *must* always be followed by a narrative revindication of the phallic law and by the hero's accession to the paternal and patronizing function of the third stage of the orthodox action-movie codes."¹⁸ He explains further that, while masochistic practices in these films, "have the trappings of a resistance to the phallic law, [they] are in fact designed to lead the male subject through a proving ground toward the empowered position that is represented in the Name of the Father."¹⁹ In this sense, he concludes, "The central masochistic moment is thus a kind of necessity in the conservation of norms of male sexuality within the discourses of popular culture; it represents a way of structuring in the full subjectivity of the egoistic hero a resistance, a way of beating the father to within an inch of his life before replacing him or allowing him to be resurrected, and finally doing things just as well as he can."²⁰

Wolverine indeed undergoes a protracted "central masochistic moment," which ultimately positions him as father/son within the symbolic order. The family romance/psychodrama the film produces vis-à-vis Wolverine's masochistic trials serves to affirm the assimilationist discourse of the film. At the beginning of *X-Men*, Wolverine is positioned outside the symbolic order. With no memory of his origins or how he came to possess the metal augmentations that run through his body, he exists at the extreme fringe of society. This dislocation is registered geographically in his presence in the remote outpost in Canada and socially in his status as a loner who lives in a camper and remains on the move. The central drama the film unfolds is Wolverine's assimilation into the symbolic order as father/son. This drama is played out through a series of encounters between Wolverine and Rogue, a young runaway who attaches herself to him.

If Wolverine is a walking embodiment of the phallus, Rogue is the personification of lack. Rogue's mutant "power" is the absence of power: she transfers the powers of those she touches to herself, leaving them drained of their "life force". In the scene that introduces Rogue we see a graphic demonstration of this "gift". As she innocently kisses her boyfriend, his skin shrivels and he lapses into a coma. That the form this initial touch takes is a sexual one underscores the degree to which Rogue's identity in the film resonates with a Freudian account of gender identification. Her power to drain away men's power—and, indeed, Rogue is only shown touching men in the course of the film—seems an exaggerated enactment of Freud's account of penis envy. At the conclusion of this opening scene, Rogue screams at her mother, "Don't touch me!" a moment within the larger psychodrama that signals her break from her mother and the commencement of her search for identification with a father who will allow her to be/have the phallus.

When we next encounter Rogue, this quest for the father is well underway. She has fled from her own family and has departed for the frontier. In Laughton City, she witnesses Wolverine's battles in the cage, and then observes him as he comes to collect his money. This scene of their initial encounter stresses the identification the two characters instantly feel toward one another. As they each sit at the bar, a television report describes an upcoming summit of world leaders in which the "mutant phenomenon" will be discussed. Wolverine and Rogue exchange a questioning look at this moment, underscoring for the viewer their mutual recognition. As the news report concludes, Wolverine is accosted by one of the men he has defeated in the cage. The man confronts him about his identity, suggesting that he is a mutant, and, while his back is turned, draws a knife. As Rogue calls out a warning, Wolverine turns and, for the first time in the film, exposes his claws. It is Wolverine's performance with his blades—a symbolic exhibition of the phallus—that implicitly inspires Rogue to follow Wolverine from the bar and stow away in his truck.

It is at the point where Wolverine discovers Rogue in the truck that his own assimilation into the symbolic order begins. He initially refuses to help her upon discovering her there, yet he quickly changes his mind and assents to taking her in. His treatment of her almost immediately suggests a paternal relationship: he calls her "kid," feeds her and invites her to warm her hands at his truck's heater. After they are attacked by Sabretooth, rescued by the X-Men, and taken to Xavier's school, Wolverine continues to express concern for Rogue, watching through a window as she flirts with a boy her age.

Yet much of the film's energy comes from the ambivalence with which it treats the relationship between Wolverine and Rogue. Their respective adoption of the roles of father and daughter are clearly mapped onto a Freudian narrative of sexual desire. Wolverine's paternal treatment of Rogue is measured against the scenes in which she regards him with a deep interest—a gaze that is explicitly sexualized only at the conclusion of the film, when Dr. Grey remarks to Wolverine, "I think she's a bit taken with you." Yet the scene that most graphically symbolizes the sexual component of their relationship comes at the center of the film. Rogue steals into Wolverine's room at the school after hearing him moaning and talking in his sleep. As she leans over him, Wolverine wakes from his nightmare and reflexively impales Rogue with his claws. It is an episode that morphs nightmare into wet dream, claws into penis, father and daughter into lovers. As she gasps for breath, she clutches him, drawing out his "life force" in order to save herself from the wounds he has inflicted. At the conclusion of the scene, Rogue parts from him, turns to the gaping crowd witnessing this scene from the doorway and murmurs, "It was an accident,"—an explanation that might allude to his penetration of her, her depletion of him, or both, but most importantly conveys the unconscious dynamics at work in their relationship to one another.

As in the initial scene where she has kissed the boy, Wolverine is nearly killed by Rogue's touch, yet from this point on, his bond with her is only deepened. Rogue flees from the school, and while she sits at the train station, wistfully watching a mother embrace her son in a nearby seat, Wolverine arrives to retrieve her. Suggesting their status as family by linking them under the rubric "people like us", Wolverine embraces her and promises to take care of her. While at this point, the Freudian narrative might appear to have overtaken and displaced the narrative of racial identity, I would suggest that it is precisely

through the gender narrative that the racial narrative is played out. Just as Wolverine promises to protect Rogue, Magneto arrives and abducts her. It is this abduction which forces Wolverine to complete his assimilation into the symbolic order. Once he has returned to Xavier's school, Wolverine immediately prepares to depart on his own to find Rogue. Yet Xavier steps in and implores him to join the X-Men. While Wolverine's initial willingness to stay at the school and interact with the X-Men has been predicated on Xavier's promise to help him learn about his past, he now acquiesces to join Xavier's team in order to save Rogue. This compliance with Xavier's wishes—and, implicitly with his political agenda—is signified by his donning of the X-Men's black leather suit.

To fully understand the significance of Wolverine's enlistment with Xavier, we need to return to the character of Magneto and explore how his narrative within the film departs from Wolverine's. While Wolverine's narrative of entry into the role of father to Rogue and son to Xavier seems to follow what Kaja Silverman has characterized as "the dominant fiction", Magneto's alternative narrative in the film deviates radically from it.²¹ Wolverine is drawn into a family romance through his attachment to Rogue, but Magneto remains outside of the symbolic order, dwelling in a cave with his team of throwbacks. Indeed, while Wolverine's form of "difference" is tamed and assimilated into a recognizable sexual/racial discourse, Magneto's difference is represented as increasingly deviant and threatening.

In Smith's exploration of the structuring codes of action films, he suggests that one typically discovers within such action narratives, "a quite marked antihomosexual sentiment."²² Such a disavowal is forcefully rendered in the centerpiece scene involving Magneto that serves as a bookend to Wolverine's penetration of Rogue. Having abducted the anti-mutant crusader Senator Kelly, Magneto uses a machine he has constructed to concentrate his magnetic powers and channel them into the body of this adversary. As with the impalement of Rogue, the erotic nature of the penetration is highlighted in this scene, with Magneto arching and writhing, then collapsing when his emission of power has been released. Senator Kelly, meanwhile, moans as the gelatinous energy field suffuses his bound body.

This scene helps to illuminate the implicit menace that Magneto represents within the symbolic economy of the film. Contrasting as it does with Wolverine's encounter with Rogue, the scene underscores the degree to which Magneto's "Brotherhood" is a non-heterosexual one. Magneto's character is assigned no female love interest in the film, and his central acts of penetration all focus on men. Indeed, while Wolverine's counterpart Rogue signifies conventional lack, Magneto's only female cohort, Mystique, is conspicuously polymorphous.²³

While Wolverine's phallic energy is increasingly channeled into a larger heterosexual matrix, Magneto's grand scheme is to make all of the world's leaders mutants like himself. The machine he has constructed and with which he experiments on Senator Kelly is designed to concentrate his energy into a radiation that mutates "normal" humans. This effort at inversion has both sexual and racial connotations: it resonates with homophobic fears of a predatory gay male population determined to seduce and convert, and detonates the boundaries of racial difference, suggesting an aggressive and dangerous form of difference that threatens to overtake and assimilate the mainstream. Indeed, Magneto's attempts to achieve his goal of a global



Wolverine and Mystique



mutant brotherhood are characterized horrifically. His attempt to mutate Senator Kelly causes Kelly to disintegrate into a puddle of water—a stark image of feminization. Added to this is the muddled signification of the scene in which Magneto attempts to mutate the world's leaders. Here a variety of ethnic minorities are shown fleeing from Magneto's gelatinous energy field as he implicitly threatens their rich racial and ethnic diversity.

It is this climactic scene that brings Wolverine and Magneto into direct contact again. They do battle for Rogue, whom Magneto intends to use as a conduit for magnifying his powers and channeling them onto the unsuspecting world leaders gathered nearby. At this point, the "dominant fiction", and Xavier's racial conservatism finally fully intermingle, for Wolverine's rescue of Rogue is coterminous with his foiling of Magneto's radical plan to force others to be different like him. At the conclusion of the film, Wolverine chooses to clasp Rogue to him, allowing his life force to be drained, and permitting the wounds he has suffered to surface on his body in the absence of his regenerative power. Such a moment might imply the sort of subversion of conventional masculinity that Silverman describes when she identifies a series of films that "embrace castration, alterity, specularly."²⁴ Yet, as Smith predicts, while Wolverine willingly submits to castration, it is in the interest of a larger dominant fiction. He quickly heals, declares his love for the more age-appropriate Jean Grey, then departs, unencumbered by his new 'daughter', whom he leaves in the care of his new 'father', Xavier. The final scene in the film shows Wolverine blasting away triumphantly on Cyclops's motorcycle. Yet Wolverine's apparent freedom is fully contained within the dominant fictions of conventional masculinity, heterosexuality, and white power.

X-Men models for its audience what it characterizes as racial tolerance, and many viewers accept this claim at face value. Yet while paying lip service to tolerance, the film actually stages difference as a fearsome, even crushing force that must be controlled. Despite the debate it stages concerning race through its deployment of King and X, the final determination of the status of difference is made in the film through an unequivocal narrative of phallic power and entitlement that consolidates whiteness and masculinity. Viewers' imperviousness to this narrow and unforgiving narrative of gender identity suggests that in the domain of comics and their adaptations gendered relations remain deeply calcified. Given the particular power of comics to teach civic values, it is important that films within this genre engage with issues of race and gender intelligibly. Many dismiss comic book films as the emptiest form of escapism, yet worse than such emptiness is mock political heroism. Perhaps in a sequel yet to be made, the *X-Men* franchise will not simply talk about political tolerance, but depict it as well.

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Notes

- 1 IMDB offers multiple forms of information for every film released in the U.S.(and other countries), including plot summary, detailed information regarding cast and crew, hundreds of reviews, awards information, trivia, promotional materials, and links to other sources of information on each

film. IMDB also features both a "viewer comments" page and a message board for each film in the database.

- 2 Sharon Willis, *High Contrast: Race and Gender in Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Durham: Duke UP, 1997), p.58.
- 3 Although Halle Berry's position as the only African-American with a significant role in the cast would suggest that her function in the film is vital to this analysis, her limited screen time and restricted dialogue minimize her impact. Indeed, out of the fifteen or so lines of dialogue she is assigned, it is only in the one cited here and a later moment when she makes explicit her loyalty to Xavier (remarking to Wolverine, "At least I've chosen a side") that her racial identity is gestured to in the film.
- 4 The film adaptation accentuates the more evolved quality of Xavier's *X-Men* by omitting characters like Beast and Nightcrawler who possess more animalistic traits.
- 5 For discussions of *X-Men's* allusions to King and X, see Demetry, "X-Men," and Dussere, "Queer World."
- 6 In his review of the *X-2* ("The X-Men's Dark Sequel Will Please the Fans," *The Times of London*, 17 April 2003, *Times* 2, p. 18), David Thompson explains the relation of the *X-Men* comics to the Civil Rights Movement as follows:
During the Sixties, the comic-book industry watchdog proscribed any explicit discussion of race and sexuality. Yet the scenario of Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters introduced a generation of young readers to questions of prejudice and intolerance in a brave and adult way. If such claims sound grandiose, it is worth bearing in mind that the *X-Men* first appeared in September 1963—a month after King's march on Washington, and at a time when 'Whites Only' signs were still in use.
Wesley Morris ("Movie Review," *The Boston Globe*, 2 May 2003, Arts, p. C1) sees this legacy continue a decade later, remarking that "what was bold about the comic book—once writer Chris Claremont began crafting the stories in the mid-'70s—was how comfortably it incorporated civil- and human-rights allegories."
- 7 Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1993), p.136.
- 8 With the exception of the brief confrontation between Magneto and the police, the film never again shows mutants physically fighting humans, instead staging battles between the two mutant factions.
- 9 Thomas Elsaesser and Warren Buckland, *Studying Contemporary American Film: A Guide to Movie Analysis* (New York: Oxford UP, 2002), 31.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 The full complexities of Wolverine's character are beyond the scope of this article—he might, for instance, be read in terms of the cyberpunk genre, through a genealogy including Joanna Russ's Jael in *The Female Man* (Boston: Beacon, 1976), and William Gibson's Molly in *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace, 1984), or of the Gothic tradition as it is discussed by critic Mark Edmundson in *Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sadoomasochism, and the Culture of Gothic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997).
- 14 Yvonne Tasker, "Fists of Fury: Discourses of Race and Masculinity in the Martial Arts Cinema," in *Race and the Subject of Masculinities*, ed. Harry Stecopoulos and Michael Uebel (Durham: Duke UP, 1997), pp. 315-16.
- 15 "Evolution" (Interview with David Hayter) *Creative Screenwriting* 10, no. 3 (2003): p.44.
- 16 Paul Smith, "Eastwood Bound," in *Constructing Masculinity*, ed. Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis, and Simon Watson (New York: Routledge, 1995), p.81.
- 17 As quoted in Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 265. The connection between Dirty Harry and Wolverine was most overtly referenced in a well-known episode of the *Uncanny X-Men* (volume 133) in which Wolverine echoes one of Dirty Harry's most well-known monologues. This episode was later reprised in an episode of the television series entitled, "Dark Phoenix Saga Part II: Inner Circle." This persona complicates the notion that the *X-Men* comics perpetuated the spirit of the Civil Rights Movement. As Wright explains: "Wolverine was one of the many tough, right-wing antiheroes who emerged in popular culture to reflect the antigovernment attitudes generated by the Vietnam War, Watergate, and reaction against the rights revolution of the 1960s. Unencumbered by bureaucratic technicalities or liberal sensibilities, Wolverine dispensed justice with righteous violence." p.265.
- 18 Smith, "Eastwood," pp. 83-4.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 94.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- 21 Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
- 22 Smith, "Eastwood," p. 84.
- 23 The casting of Ian McKellen, one of the most openly gay actors working in contemporary film and a gay rights activist, as Magneto lends support to this reading and suggests again the several levels on which the film operates.
- 24 Silverman, *Male Subjectivity*, p. 3.

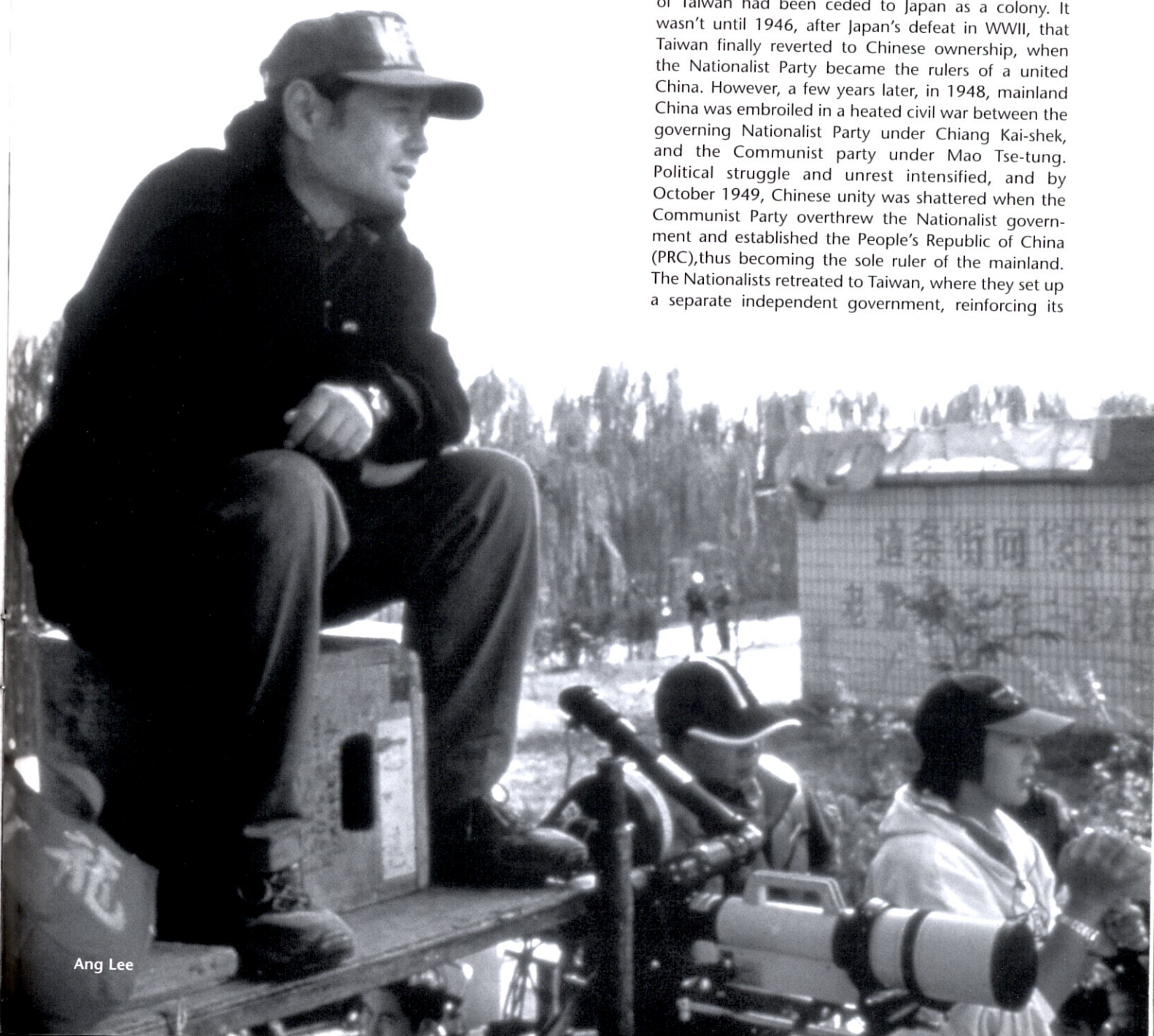
A Brief History of Taiwan's Film Industry

BY ALICE SHIH

Pinyin names in this article are all quoted with the last name first, to respect the proper way of addressing a Chinese person.

This year, 2011, marks the 100th anniversary of the Republic of China (ROC), when the Chinese people overthrew the Qing Dynasty in 1911 and established a republic under the leadership of founding father, Dr. Sun Yat-sen, with the Chinese Nationalist party in power.

As a result of the victory over China by the Japanese in the first Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), the island of Taiwan had been ceded to Japan as a colony. It wasn't until 1946, after Japan's defeat in WWII, that Taiwan finally reverted to Chinese ownership, when the Nationalist Party became the rulers of a united China. However, a few years later, in 1948, mainland China was embroiled in a heated civil war between the governing Nationalist Party under Chiang Kai-shek, and the Communist party under Mao Tse-tung. Political struggle and unrest intensified, and by October 1949, Chinese unity was shattered when the Communist Party overthrew the Nationalist government and established the People's Republic of China (PRC), thus becoming the sole ruler of the mainland. The Nationalists retreated to Taiwan, where they set up a separate independent government, reinforcing its



Ang Lee



legitimacy by retaining the title of Republic of China (ROC). After 1949, then, China essentially had two governments, the PRC and the ROC, with the latter, synonymous with Taiwan, carrying the Nationalist hope of defeating the Communists and retaking the mainland to reunify China. Needless to say, the PRC's Communist party was also waiting for a chance to conquer Taiwan from the Nationalists, but was afraid of the military aid the Taiwanese were receiving from the U.S. These two governments are still at odds with each other today and occasionally threaten each other politically.

After 1948, local film production in Taiwan began slowly, and was predominantly controlled by three government agencies: the Nationalist party, the provincial government (i.e. Taiwanese government, as Taiwan is a part of China and is considered by both the Taiwanese and the mainland to be a province, not a nation) and the military. The Nationalist party's film agency, named the "Farming and Education Film Company", produced mostly narrative films. The provincial government's film agency, the "Taiwan Film Culture Company", made documentaries and social narratives, while the military made mostly military newsreels, educational documentaries and patriotic narratives. All these films were intended as propaganda tools to weed out Communist dissidents and promote unity on the island of Taiwan as it gradually entered

the "White Terror" era, which lasted from 1949–1987, which saw the prevalent use of repressive tactics and measures similar to those of the McCarthy era in the U.S.

A limited number of film production companies outside of the three government agencies were financed by venture capitalists, but these companies were short-lived as their owners did not treat film as an art, nor did they have a long term business vision. Film investment was merely a tool to turn a quick profit.

The "Farming and Education Film Company" and the "Taiwan Film Company," which had control of theatrical screens, combined in 1954 to form the "Central Motion Picture Corporation (CMP)", which continues to exist today. The CMP followed the traditional film production policies, turning out melodramas with anti-communist sentiments in the late 50s and early 60s, but these films did not do well when compared to the commercial films produced by Hong Kong's Shaw Brothers Studios and the Motion Picture & General Investment Studio (MPGI).

However, 1963 was a very important year for Mandarin language film production in Taiwan. After making the Hong Kong blockbuster *The Love Eterne* (1963), director Li Han Hsiang broke his contract with Shaw Brothers due to a money dispute. As a result, he was forbidden to make movies independently in Hong Kong. Consequently, he moved to Taiwan where he established the Grand Motion Picture Company (GMPC), with



the financial backing of Shaw Brothers' rival MPGI and the Taiwan Film Culture Company, and brought with him a large number of Hong Kong film stars and crew. Unlike the local Taiwanese productions shot in black & white, Li started making wide-screen period-costume opera dramas in colour with movie stars, just like a Hollywood production. Li's spectacular films like GMPC's maiden production *Seven Fairies* (1964) enlightened and educated local film professionals as well as aroused the Taiwanese public, and for the first time, a Taiwanese local production won over popular Hong Kong films at the box office. Other Taiwanese producers started to take filmmaking seriously, adopting this production style, and the ripple effect marked the dawn of the Taiwanese film's golden era.

Another new trend emerged in 1963. Li Hsing, a locally trained director, made *Our Neighbours*, a film about the livelihood of various people in an underprivileged neighbourhood in Taiwan who share a common courtyard and a water pump, paying homage to the works of the pre-war realist Chinese classics in the 30s and 40s. He portrayed authentic three-dimensional characters whose lives intertwined as they faced poverty with dignity despite limited social aids. Creative montage sequences were used to reveal various social strata of Taiwanese society and their favourite pastimes.

This realistic approach was very different from the studio

films produced by Shaw Brothers, MPGI or GMPC which fed on fantasy and escapism. *Our Neighbours* thus initiated an original kind of genre for Chinese film. Gong Hong, the general manager of CMPC at the time, recognized Li's achievement and his innovation. The three Taiwanese film agencies tried for over ten years after the Japanese occupation to create a strong and viable industry but no avail, as audiences were resistant to the hard-core ideology of their films. Government-sponsored propaganda in the past had been anti-Communist, but by the early 60s, a different propaganda about a new and successful Taiwan was needed to promote a contemporary positive image to the world by showing off her agricultural success. Gong envisioned that "soft-core" propaganda films with high entertainment value and a "Healthy Realism" emphasis would be the new direction for Taiwanese cinema, so he hired Li Hsing and other new directors to materialize his plan. He also adopted the star system and cultivated local stars like Tang Baoyun and Wang Mochou, utilized wide screen colour technology, and started producing "happy peasant" films like Li Hsing's *Oyster Girl* (1964) and *Beautiful Duckling* (1965). CMPC productions at this time were mostly love stories and moralizing family melodramas, and they encouraged a budding Taiwanese consciousness in the audience. Both the local and overseas film markets (i.e. Hong Kong, South East Asia, European and North American

Chinatowns) hungered for Mandarin films outside the opera, comedy and melodrama genres. They gladly accepted these new films and the first wave of Taiwanese classics was created.

1964 saw a tragic loss in the Chinese film community when Loke Wan Tho, the Malaysian-born Singaporean Chinese business visionary and owner of MPGI, died in a plane crash in Taiwan. along with his executives and important Taiwanese film producers. As a result, Li Han Hsiang and GMPC lost their financial backing from MPGI, went heavily into debt during the making of the *Hsi Shih, the Beauty of Beauties* (1965) and were sued. Li continued to struggle and make period dramas. He financed productions helmed by other directors, juggling his time between courtrooms and film sets. Although this was a stressful time for him, his film, *Hsi Shih, Beauty of Beauties*, turned out to be a spectacular war epic which could be seen now as the equivalent of *Gone With the Wind* or *Saving Private Ryan*. CGI special effects technology did not exist at the time but Li Han Hsiang was able to create extraordinarily powerful images such as one in which the camera reveals blood-stained waves breaking ashore against a beach of dead soldiers, with thousands of people running up towering steps away from terror toward a temple guarded by a castle overlooking the beach. The camera pulls back from the troubled faces of the soldiers to show chaos on the beachfront, and then cranes up to reveal looming warships out in the ocean all in one take, exhibiting Li's masterful vision. King Hu, who had kick-started the swordplay (wuxia) film genre in Hong Kong with *Come Drink With Me* (1966), followed Li Han Hsiang by leaving Hong Kong's Shaw Brothers for Taiwan, where he established his own production company in

1967. His first production there was the magnificent swordplay classic *Dragon Inn* (1967), a tale of an evil Eunuch who bested the King's general and sent the general's children into exile. Wishing to cut off the general's bloodline, the eunuch and his swordsmen ambush them at the desolate Dragon Inn, but his plan is challenged by the general's loyal followers, a group of martial arts experts. Hu employed fresh cinematic techniques like the "Flying Wire" and montage sequences to enhance the dynamic elements of heightened action, and in this was highly influential on an entire generation of swordplay films all over Asia. Hu's artful wuxia epic *A Touch of Zen* (1975) about a scholar who falls in love with a woman in hiding, and is compelled to join her to fight evil forces with the help of Zen Buddhism, won Cannes' Technical Grand prize in 1975 for its glorious montage, visual effects and dazzling cinematography.

1965 also witnessed a change in the Taiwanese landscape with the shift away from agricultural farmland to developing urban cities, like Taipei, with the consequence that urban concerns became a growing interest to the public. Author Chiung Yao's urban-set novels were extremely popular and became a cultural phenomenon. Her stories about lonely souls of the city who long for love appealed to the citizens of Taipei whose lives they closely resembled. Her books took students, housewives and factory workers by storm and were soon adapted into screenplays and turned into movies. This sparked a whole new genre of urban love stories, which carried on for almost two decades. The most celebrated of all Taiwanese filmmakers, Hou Hsiao-hsien, was also initially influenced by Chiung's work. Before he was the winner of multiple prestigious film festival



awards including those from Venice and Berlin, he wrote his first two features *Lovable You* (1980) and *Play While you Play* (1981) in conformance with the conventions of this genre. Both films were co-productions with Hong Kong and followed the same formula of a light comedy about a budding romance; both featured hit songs for soundtrack sales and starred Hong Kong heart throb Kenny B and Taiwanese superstar Feng Fei Fei to ensure export and distribution. Those filmgoers who know Hou from his later more famous films like *A City of Sadness* (1989) would have difficulty recognizing these films as Hou's works. Chiung's dominance in Taiwanese culture is still present today as she is still adapting and producing TV dramas from her novels.

After US President Nixon visited mainland China in 1972, both the US and Japan abandoned Taiwan politically, and established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China. Taiwan suddenly lost her two most treasured international allies and faced a big political identity crisis. The Taiwanese felt deeply betrayed by the Japanese as witnessed in the film industry's reaction with CMPC's productions of anti-Japanese patriotic epics like Ting Shan-hsi's *The Everlasting Glory* (1974) and *Eight Hundred Heroes* (1975). The Taiwanese public was very receptive to these films as were all the Asians who had suffered under the Japanese occupation.

By 1980, Taipei had become a large metropolitan city populated with a strong upper-middle class who had benefited from the recent economic boom and increase in foreign trade. While Taiwanese films were still repeating old formulas, the audience had grown tired of them. Foreign-trained intellectuals

like Peggy Chiao, who at the time was studying in the US, couldn't connect with these films and started to criticize them in Taiwanese newspapers. In this way, Chiao, the Taiwanese equivalent of André Bazin, became very influential in the film community even before she returned to Taiwan in 1981. Edward Yang, (Cannes Film Festival Best Director recipient in 2000 for *Yi Yi: (A One and a Two...)*) who had also been living in the US, coincidentally came back at the same time. This new blood in the ROC film community was deeply influenced by the French New Wave and the Italian neo-realist movement and strongly advocated for the concept of the new cinema movement in Taiwan. Chiao would persist in her vision, helping Hou Hsiao-hsien, Tsai Ming-liang and many more directors up to the present day, to adopt these principles. Emerging as the most important Taiwanese film scholar, she became a producer herself in 1997.

CMPC by 1981 was headed by producer Ming Chi, who also saw the need for change in the film industry. Hoping to re-energize and promote Taiwanese culture to the rest of the world, he hired new talents like writer Wu Nien-jen (writer of Edward Yang's *That Day on the Beach* [1983], Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Dust in the Wind* [1987] and *A City of Sadness* [1989]), and director Edward Yang. This new cinema movement embraced reality, similar to the first wave in the early 60s, but this time the filmmakers employed esthetic and formal principles under European influence. The home-grown film professionals who already had production experience, like Hou Hsiao-hsien, quickly caught on and experimented with this new style. Thus in the early 1980s came the new wave of Taiwanese film that were to become classics. It wasn't a revolution of subject matter, as reality was again the focus, but it was a revolution in film esthetics.

To capture reality on film, Taiwanese filmmakers turned to personal experience, stories ranging from contemporary social issues to their own coming of age stories set in the past. The new wave movement lasted for about 15 years and peaked in 1989 with Hou Hsiao-hsien's *A City of Sadness*, which was awarded the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival. The film employed long takes, well-designed mise-en-scène and esthetic compositions to capture violent conflicts of the government with the vulnerable Taiwanese public in an ethnically diverse society in 1947. This wave of endearing films by the Taiwanese auteurs was instantly recognized by the international film community. Taiwanese films by then functioned as political dissent to criticize social policies, creating cultural documents as well as establishing a reputable Taiwanese identity.

During this period, Taiwanese films garnered many international awards and the new wave directors gradually matured as cinematic masters. Malaysian-born-Taiwanese filmmaker Tsai Ming-liang, director of *Rebels of the Neon God* (1992) and *Vive L'Amour* (1994), learned his craft from the masters and furthered the trend, while urban love stories and family melodramas, which used to be the staples of Taiwanese productions, dwindled. Most of these award-winning films were the director's personal journals and were not popular at the box office. The Taiwanese film industry was also challenged by the Hollywood invasion with the loosening of the print quota system under the World Trade Organization's pressure. Failed box office returns resulted in a decrease in film investment and the industry became unable to sustain itself. Taiwanese films failed to connect with local audiences and lost their own cultural identity. In 1987, the one-party authoritarian rule by the Nationalist party was over, dissidents founded the Democratic



Progressive Party in the ROC, and open political discussion was allowed. Film, which had previously acted as an important platform for such discussion, lost its unique role once the taboo was lifted. By the mid-1990s, the Taiwanese film industry had collapsed in all three roles it played (i.e., political, cultural and industrial), and the number of Taiwanese films produced declined dramatically.

By 1997, Taiwanese production had dropped to fewer than 20 films a year, and continued to decline. The government tried different measures to revive its industry including increasing grants, but these incentives had a limited impact. The most important outcome, perhaps, was the rise of the Taiwanese-American director Ang Lee, who received funding from CPMC's Hsu Li-kong to finance his first feature *Pushing Hands* (1991). His talent was thus discovered, international recognition followed, and he eventually moved to the United States to make English language films like *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) and *The Ice Storm* (1997). Lee subsequently returned to his Chinese roots with the international swordplay hit *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), which garnered four Oscars. Taiwanese art films continued to be recognized abroad at international film festivals, but were unable to generate sustainable revenue to be considered commercial successes. By 2001, local film professionals turned to collaborate with film investors from Hong Kong and the Mainland, and interesting films began to appear once more. These new works didn't follow the Taiwanese auteur's doctrine of strict realism. Their film forms varied as the directors experiment with different visual elements like animation or fantasy sequences. The trend continued to evolve and from 2005 onwards, Taiwanese filmmakers were innovatively experimenting with romantic comedies (Wei Te-Sheng's *Cape No. 7*, (2008), gangsters (Doze Niu's *Monga*, 2010), horror (Su Chao-bin's *Silk*, 2006), travelogues (Chen Huai-en's *Island Etude*, 2006), gay themes (Zero Chou's *Spider Lilies*, 2007), black comedies (Chung Mong-hung's *Parking*, 2008), porn (Tsai Ming-liang's *The Wayward Cloud*, 2005), reportage (Leon Dai's *Cannot Live Without You*, 2009) and youth issue films (Cheng Wen-tang's *Summer's Tail*, 2007). Taiwanese audiences seem to be more receptive towards these films of the third wave than the auteur films. While they are intended as commercial films, they also deal with important social issues. It might be a provocative commentary on social injustice in the form of reportage (*Cannot Live Without You*), or a harmonious multi-cultural society story under the disguise of a romantic comedy as in *Cape No. 7*, which features a mix of local Taiwanese (Taiwanese speaking), out-of-province Chinese (Mandarin or other dialects speaking), Japanese expatriates, Caucasians and Natives. The Taiwanese public was fascinated by this realistic population mix with diverse cultural backgrounds who were forced to deal with their differences and to resolve their conflicts to reach a common goal in a comedic way. To the local viewers, the romance was a bonus; it was the clashes of the colourful secondary characters that totally stole the show and won the audience's heart.

Most of this generation of directors is young and together they form a collective movement to rejuvenate the Taiwanese film industry. Unlike the previous generation of filmmakers who dwelled on memories of various political issues which influenced their lives, this generation doesn't have much interest in extraordinary and/or unique personal experience. They grew up on TV images, adopting surrogate experiences and living in the present moment. Their focus is on immediacy; they don't

care much about the past or the future. These films are comparatively more playful and accessible, not intellectually or emotionally demanding, like those of the earlier generation of Taiwanese directors. Hou Chi-Jan's *One Day* (2010) is a good example of a genre-deviation film. It is a time travel love story built on dreams, not science and without special effects. The female protagonist keeps dreaming of encountering a young soldier on board a ferry. He discloses to her in her dreams that they would fall in love in the future but he would have been dead by then. Its story is a journey of revelation through time travel between dreams and reality, depicting characters who choose to fall in love knowing that they are from different time periods and will never be able to actually grow old together.

This new movement started to build momentum at the end of the first decade of the 21st century and continues in the second.. Emerging Taiwanese filmmakers saw the big local box office return from *Cape No. 7* and were inspired, local audiences got excited, and movie investors got back in the game after a long hiatus, driving up production numbers. However, their subject matter is inherently about their Taiwanese experience with a strong Taiwanese perspective. More characters speak Taiwanese instead of Mandarin, reflecting the diverse political and ethnic mix in modern Taiwanese society. While very successful locally, *Cape No. 7* did not make a big box office return outside of Taiwan, which signifies that the Taiwanese film industry has yet to find a way to connect with the global Mandarin film market. *Cape No. 7*'s director Wei Te-Sheng is trying to break into the world market outside of Taiwan with his second feature *Seediq Bale* (2011), a two parts war epic of the Taiwanese natives who fought during the Japanese occupation.

It is an unfortunate truth that the local commercial film market is not big enough to sustain a vibrant film industry without an export market. Private investors, especially co-production partners from Hong Kong and China who have played an important role in supporting market-friendly films, recognized that this strong local flavor does not translate overseas. Consequently, they have reduced the budgets for these films to compensate for the fact that it would be harder to recuperate the cost for a big budget film from the local box office alone. The Government's film grants continue to support personal projects or independent productions. Young directors continue to experiment with their craft and there are many positive outcomes. Most of them do not plan on making commercial films with big returns; they just want to connect with an audience and be able to recuperate the costs so they can go on to make their next film. As for the masters like Hou and Tsai, they continue to produce esthetically stunning films but are required to look to European investors for support.

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A REPORT FROM THE 2011 BERLINALE

Governing Relationships

BY ALISON FRANK

A significant proportion of the films I saw at this year's Berlin Film Festival dealt with a similar underlying theme: namely, how political leaders, their ideologies and decisions can influence individual citizens' platonic and romantic relationships. In this review I will discuss six films: in the first two, characters betray their friends as a result of political ideology; in the next two, totalitarianism separates married couples; the final two films showcase the failure of laws and local leaders that attempt to bring couples together.

Wolfgang Murnburger's *Mein bester Feind* (*My Best Enemy*, 2011) is set in 1930s Vienna. Victor Kaufmann and Rudi Smejkal

have been friends since they were children, as Rudi's mother was the Kaufmanns' housekeeper. As a young man, Rudi joins the SS because Nazism seems to offer him a good chance to gain power and prestige. To enhance his reputation within the Party, he reveals a secret to his superiors: the Kaufmanns possess a Michelangelo drawing allegedly stolen from the Vatican several centuries previously. Rudi naively thinks that he has struck a deal with the Nazis: in exchange for his betrayal, the Kaufmanns will be granted safe passage to Switzerland. His plan backfires, however: the drawing is confiscated and the Kaufmann family is dispersed to various concentration camps.

Narratives about friendships between Jews and Gentiles during WWII have typically focused on those who helped their Jewish friends and neighbours, rather than those who delivered them up to the Nazis. Murnburger's film is unusual, then, in that it shows how extreme ideology could ruin long-standing friendships by exploiting any underlying feelings of resentment: Rudi is jealous of his friend Victor not only because he is wealthy, but because he has won the heart of Lena, a girl that Rudi would have liked for himself. Although the film attempts to explain Rudi's behaviour to some extent, it certainly does not excuse it.

This film is original in another respect, one that is particularly satisfying to an audience that will feel disgusted by Rudi's selfish opportunism. Talking to scriptwriter Paul Hengge who is Jewish, Murnburger discovered that many Jews were tired of being perpetually cast as victims in WWII films. Although it is easy to see how this type-casting occurred, a consequence of accurately portraying the crimes committed against Jewish people, to focus primarily or exclusively on victimhood is to reduce the characters to one-dimensionality. It is important to maintain a sense of well-rounded individuals, rather than lumping Jewish

My Best Enemy





My Best Enemy

characters together as an undifferentiated group defined by their oppression. Murnberger's film not only gives a sense of the Kaufmanns as spirited and outgoing characters before the war: it also allows them two different types of revenge (which I won't spoil by revealing here). To be sure, the opportunity that the film offers to Victor would have been just about impossible in real life: too many coincidences and strokes of good luck are required. Nonetheless, the audience's appreciative laughter during these scenes, far from making light of the Holocaust, shows how much everyone enjoys seeing the tables turned, and Victor restored to his former status as an active participant rather than a passive victim. Even if this part of the film is unrealistic, it does metaphorically point to the sheer resilience and determination demanded of Holocaust survivors.

Elke Hauck's *Der Preis* (*The Prize*, 2011) can act as an interesting companion piece to *My Best Enemy*. In this film an architect, Alexander Beck, must return to his hometown because he has won a competition to replace the old apartment blocks that he and his friends grew up in. Throughout the film, though, Alex appears very uneasy about this return. Gradually it becomes clear that he feels great guilt towards his childhood friends, because he betrayed one of them during their youth in communist East Germany. Although he was only a young

teenager when the betrayal took place, and it was not as vindictive as Rudi's betrayal of Victor in *My Best Enemy*, the consequences were just as serious.

Despite the fact that both films deal with totalitarian states offering childhood friends the opportunity to turn on each other, the two films couldn't be more different in their approach. While *My Best Enemy* takes a vibrant, fast-paced, entertaining approach, *The Prize* is contemplative in the way of the worst art cinema, moving slowly through dull settings towards a predictably tragic end. Although episodes from Alex's childhood add a little colour and communist-era interest to the narrative, there are an equal number of present-day scenes where Alex, his colleagues or his former friends stare expressionlessly into space, a lazy way for the director to translate a turbulent inner world. Encounters between the architect and his former friend's sister are toe-curlingly awkward. Perhaps there is a genre of slow-moving films that showcase social ineptitude: *The Prize* brings to mind another German film, Mauren Ade's *Der Wald vor lauter Bäumen* (*The Forest for the Trees*, 2003), which followed the painful plight of woman who moves to a new town, where she is ineffective both in her job as a high school teacher and in her forced attempts to make friends with her neighbours.



The Prize

Totalitarianism can have an impact on married couples as well as friends. Václav Kadrnka's *Osmdesát dopisů* (*Eighty Letters*, 2011) is set in the past and focuses on a day in the life of young Vacek who accompanies his mother on a series of errands: she is gathering the necessary documents for them to apply to leave communist Czechoslovakia and join his father in England. This film is even more slow-moving and contemplative than *The Prize*, yet here these qualities are justified: more than telling a story, the film replicates an experience for the viewer. Yes, it can be boring to stay with Vacek as he sits in a porter's lodge or a doctor's waiting room until his mother comes back with the required document. But as he does so, the sounds and details of everyday life under communism are conveyed with far greater realism than in *The Prize*, which focused on gratifying viewers' stereotyped expectations of socialist youth clubs and forbidden pop music from the West.

In *Eighty Letters*, life in the West remains an idea: Jeon Kyu-hwan's *Dance Town* (2010), by contrast, spends very little time in present-day communist North Korea, shifting rapidly to one character's new life in the free South. The film begins in Pyongyang, where the audience is introduced to a married couple: they have no children, and neither of them is very attractive, but their relationship is affectionate, romantic even,

full of shared confidences and pleasures. The husband, Man-il, makes regular business trips to China, which gives him the opportunity to buy goods that are unavailable or forbidden in North Korea: luxury face cream for his wife, for example, or pornographic DVDs which the couple watch together, wearing headphones so that the neighbours won't hear. Despite their caution, they are reported to the authorities: the wife, Jung-nim, receives a frantic phone call from her husband, who tells her to leave the house immediately and board a Chinese fishing boat to Seoul, where he hopes to join her later. When Jung-nim arrives there, the South Koreans do everything they can to help her in her new life: they give her an apartment and a stipend, assist her in finding a job and suggest a variety of social activities to fill her spare time. The film is original in that rather than focusing on the Jung-nim's appreciation of her new freedom, it reflects the difficulty of life as a refugee: the experience is bewildering, and all she really wants is to be reunited with her husband. The film contains a number of examples of urban loneliness in Seoul where everyone, as the title suggests, dances to their own tune. The film's underlying theme is that democracy and free-market capitalism aren't much of a comfort if love is missing.

As a counterpoint to these films where couples are separated



by communism, come two films that showcase misguided official attempts to bring couples together. In Bujar Alimani's *Amnistia* (*Amnesty*, 2011), Albania adopts EU regulations which allow married prisoners to receive conjugal visits from their spouses. The film traces the impact that this new law has on the lives of two characters, Elsa and Shpetim. Neither of them seems to feel a great connection with their partner: the monthly sex appointments take place mechanically in the dreary surroundings of a cell kept for the purpose. Rather than significantly improving the lives of married couples, the new law has the unintended effect of facilitating relationships between prison visitors. Elsa and Shpetim come to the prison on the same day each month, and their relationship moves from polite acknowledgement, to friendship, to love. When the film's eponymous 'amnesty' takes place, however, both Elsa and Shpetim's partners are released earlier than expected. The film depicts the conflict that arises when liberal new European ideas are introduced in a society where standards of living and the older generation's attitudes to women have yet to catch up. This film, Alimani's feature debut, won a prize from the International Federation of Art Cinemas (C.I.C.A.E.) in the festival's 'Forum' section.

Erika Hníková's *Nesvatbuv* (*Matchmaking Mayor*, 2010) depicts a much more blatant official attempt to promote married life. This documentary's original title refers, literally, to a place where there is no marriage. The mayor of the village in question is concerned that many villagers in their thirties are failing to marry and have children. Aside from his firm belief in the benefits of family life, the mayor fears that his village, like so many others in Slovakia and Europe as a whole, is at risk of dying out. Having introduced the opinionated and officious mayor, the rest of film focuses on his efforts to organise a singles event with the specific goal of marriage in mind. Both the mayor and his constituents are unafraid to speak their minds, making this the funniest film of the entire festival: it is no won-

der that it took the *Tagespiegel* [newspaper] readers' prize.

Initially, I was uneasy about the humour inherent in village life, as the audience risked laughing at the villagers rather than with them: there were discos with bad dancing and worse music; grown children living with their parents in houses decorated with religious icons, fake flowers and garish animal-patterned bedspreads. You quickly develop respect for the village residents, however, as they demonstrate their good humour and firm sense of self, traits which don't allow them to be bullied by an officious mayor. The mayor's degree of credibility, meanwhile, moves in the opposite direction: this man who at first seemed amusingly eccentric, if overbearing, ultimately comes across as a would-be dictator, luckily thwarted in his efforts to put his own chosen goals and ideology ahead of the individual villagers' well-being. As he shamelessly uses a loud-speaker system to broadcast his harsh pronouncements throughout the village, one can only imagine how frighteningly at ease this mayor would have been in a totalitarian system.

The theme of government attempts to control citizens' lives seems to be popular at the moment, and I would suggest that it holds more than historical interest. Times of economic instability have, in the past, provoked extreme political solutions. As the current global economic future continues to be uncertain, directors may be reflecting a sensitivity to economic conservatism spilling over into the social realm. Scapegoats are sought for contemporary problems; citizens are encouraged to report their neighbours for welfare fraud; restrictions on immigration threaten trans-national family unity; states attempt to engineer social stability through tax incentives for married couples. These films remind us that individual freedom and wellbeing must take precedence over the state and its abstract ideologies.

Alison Frank received her DPhil from the University of Oxford and now works as a freelance film critic based in London. You can follow her on Twitter@alisonfrank.

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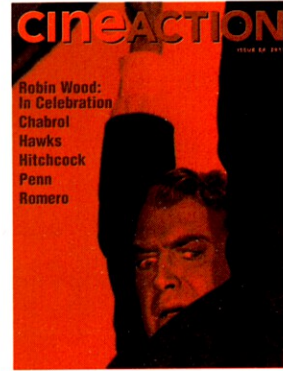
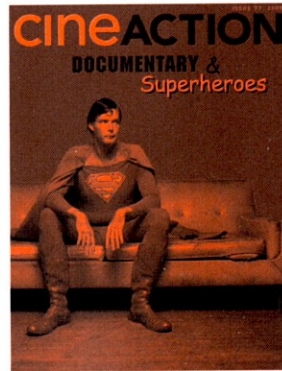
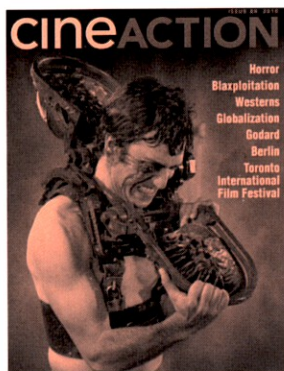
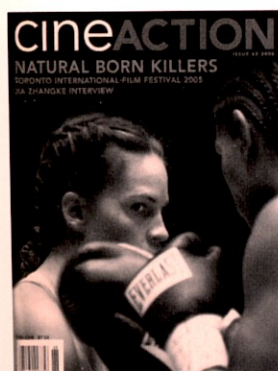
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